The Umbra Of His Starlight

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The Umbra Of His Starlight

by Apple_Saucee3

Summary

Eclipse wants to move past his old mundane life but when he's tasked to kill someone in the name of his mission, he must choose between his morality or keeping his villain persona. When Lady Devoid threatens to replace him if he doesn't come back with Aika's star shard and the end of Zira's life, Eclipse is put into a dilemma. He doesn't want to lose a life where he's comfortable behind a villain's mask and he doesn't want to go back to endless failed exams and lectures of disappointment.
This desire to prevent change leads to Eclipse going against his values and Aika sending both Zira and Eclipse through a portal to save their lives. The blonde boy finds himself in the bustling crowds of Sweet Jazz City and meets an arrogant psychologist named Sylvester Ashling who is also averse to change in his daily routine.
Together they must evade the police forces, make new companions and figure out the secrets of Sweet Jazz. This love story might have to come to a halt in the face of Zira who might be going down the wrong path Bliss Ocean's grasp.

Or

Eclipse and Zira find themselves in Sweet Jazz City and must find their way home but their perspectives are changed as they meet new people (Sylvieclipse yaoi)

Notes

The first prologue happens before the events of pppidwtbamg's pilot episode, based on an official art Kiana did on her twitter.
The second prologue happens right before chapter 2 (Still in the works wow)
Except the first chapter which will probably come out next week is months after the pilot episode and after the events of Prison of plastic (Aka one week after the museum arc)
Just typing this out to clarify timeline stuff and to remove confusion :)
(Also updates every Wednesday and make sure to follow me on @apple_saucee3 on tiktok, tumblr and instagram for official arts and updates!)

Chapter 1: A Lingering Starlight - Prologue I

Prologue I:

A Lingering Starlight

Eclipse POV: 771

The suburban street smelt of freshly cut grass and a wisp of rainfall.

Crickets sang a solemn melody, harmonising with the heavy burden in my heart. Despite the sky being illuminated by an endless amount of stars, the world still seemed dim. The universe was expansive. Its size was beyond comprehension and yet my problems still seemed to overshadow it. Tonight was supposed to change that. To others, today was just another cycle through the same timetable, the same schedules. It was nothing less and nothing more than mundane.

Little did they know, this was the night the Lyrids fell. A special meteor shower that happens annually on a mid-spring night. Last year it was too cloudy to see anything so this year it had to be perfect. I perched my telescope, tightening it to the right angle just to get the best view. The snacks were still on the kitchen counter. They were left ajar since my friends happened to have things going on…again.

One said they needed to do exam prep or they'd fail the semester.

One said they had to leave for a cousin's birthday.

And the others just seemed to not show up.

It was fine, all I needed was my telescope, my journal and I.

I couldn't let myself be distracted by small matters like who I saw the stars with. I couldn't take my eyes off the sky. Even if my heart was still on the dinner table. Still blocking out my mother's scolding lectures. I'm not good enough, I never was. That was all I needed to hear from her. The rest faded away along with the countless exams I hid in a box under my bed.

Failing grade after failing grade. The feeling wasn't pleasurable but it wasn't unfamiliar either. It was like misery became routine and I was fine with that…

I let out a sigh, I've been waiting for this moment to change my world. I wanted this moment to be different but even special events like this faded into another day. What was the point of

being here anymore? I'd probably just leave the backyard with mosquito bites and another meaningless memory. An old space textbook rested upon the grass. The hardcover became damp from coming into contact with the ground. It was a library book once but now it was a highlighted wonder that belonged to a boy too scared to see his library fine.

The sky used to make me believe that I can go anywhere. Limitless possibilities, memories and opportunities were there for me to explore. Those stars in the sky disilluded me into thinking that one day, my life would feel like an adventure. I would be a hero, saving lives and meeting new faces everyday. But I've lived life. The inciting incident never happened. I'm just another face in a crowd. I know that as long as I'm trapped within my own mind, things will end the same way over and over.

If this is how life is, maybe I don't want to go anywhere at all.

I picked up my textbook, intending to get some sleep. Tomorrow isn't any further than it usually was after all. Once I stood up and turned to the door a sparkle poked my ear from behind. With heavy eyelids, I looked at the sky one last time. In that instant, it felt as if my eyes were reflecting a whole galaxy of wonder. Beams of light stretched out through the sky. The atmosphere was painted with an array of true hope and yet there was only one star my heart was drawn to.

Against the glimmering backdrop was a girl.

I caught a glimpse of her golden hair, each strand looked like ethereal strings of fate. She floated in the midnight sky alongside a group of others yet their silhouettes seemed to dim in comparison to her pure star power.

With a magical staff in hand, she gave me a smile. It wasn't rehearsed or forced like the ones I see in the corridors everyday. A smile, so genuine, yet to someone who she was unfamiliar with. In that girl's world I was probably just another grain of sand on the world's smallest coastline. But something about that radiant star reminded me of the first time I saw the sky.

In a blink of an eye, she vanished among the meteorite shower.

As if she wasn't even there.

Yet I knew something changed.

Even if I couldn't prove it, the childhood spark the stars lit inside my heart still lingered a little longer.

Chapter 2: The Way It Was - Prologue II

Chapter Summary

After the events at the Sweet Jazz City museum, Sylvester Ashling has moved back into his apartment from his stay at the hospital. Despite the strange occurrences just a week ago, things have been nothing less than ordinary. Same schedule, same research and the same responses from the publishing house. Yet a peculiar phenomenon caught Sylvie's eye as he gazed out the window of his bedroom.
(Second prologue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue II:

The Way It Was

Sylvester POV: 817 words

No matter how much time passed, each thing stayed the way it was.

Remnants of instant noodle cups were left on the floor, close but not quite at the bin. Boxes were still scattered by the closet entrance, piled up over time yet never emptied out. I sat at my desk like I always did. Despite being at the hospital for a week, it was as if no time had passed at all. The most remarkable event which happened in the last two years was that night.

I was out for an ‘academic preview’ at the Sweet Jazz city museum. I heard from highly valued connections that a certain relic was in storage to be displayed in the months to come. An amulet which had the ability to take away one’s epithet, a power which was generated by a word intertwined with your soul. As a well-versed scholar, there is no need for me to wait like the general public. I’m the world’s youngest psychologist, graduated with a PHD at the ripe age of 15. I was above a ‘staff only’ sign. Yet my effort to extend my research led to a night of well, calamity is one way to put it.

A group of banzai blasters and those fake security guards were trying to steal the Arsane amulet. Even as a well trained epithet user, my powers weren’t able to withstand the erasure from the relic. Mera, a cunning woman who was keen to run off with the necklace, broke my bones and left me in a weakened state. Fortunately, a girl in a little bear hoodie and a wannabe evil mastermind who led the handful of banzai crooks took care of her fate. But those rascals and their leader ran off with the amulet, leaving me and Molly stranded back at the museum. I had a visit to the hospital for a while. I spent most of my days watching the fresh dew fall down the window, memorising the abundant taiga forest from my bedside

view. Molly called over from her toy store every now and then just to check up on me. She was usually interrupted by unruly Karens or her nagging sister. Yet despite the chaotic nature of it, this was the most social interaction I've had in forever!

With a faint smile, I picked up my fountain pen and continued scribbling away at my journal. I've been trying to ignore the endless amount of notifications which blasted my inbox. Many of my clients had to reschedule their appointments due to my absence at work. What a pain… I wasn't in the mood for dealing with people right now. I'd rather get lost in my own handwriting. A library's worth of tests, observations and conducted studies were squished up against each other on my bookshelf yet none of them had seen the light of day ever since I finished the last page. Publishing houses nowadays are packed with nothing but imbeciles who can't seem to see the value of my work! I'll just have to keep writing, keep researching.

To succeed was to take others down. I wasn't going to let anyone get in the way of my achievements. I will become a well renowned scientist. No matter how many people will have to suffer for me to achieve that.

My apartment complex sat upon a hill on the outskirts of the town. The window from my bedroom showcased a perfect view of what Sweet Jazz city had to offer. The moonlight which reflected off the skyscrapers in the horizon, the bustling crowds filled with stories untold and even the criminal scum which plagued the alleyways of the capital. Despite the amount of light pollution, the night sky was still painted with an array of stars. The ones who burnt the brightest outshone the ones which faded into the background. A sun could power our solar system but the other celestial bodies which had no energy to provide go over society's heads.

But tonight, a multitude of stars caught the attention of my eye. A meteorite shower, one unaligned from any celestial calendar I was aware of. Glistening through the night sky, they fell upon the city backdrop. One in particular stood out from the rest. It descended into the vibrant crowds…and yet it seemed to have no physical impact. A meteorite falling into a dense cityscape would've caused a catastrophic impact in theory but the night kept progressing as normal.

"Strange" I muttered under my breath. I grabbed a notepad from an adjacent drawer and slung my labcoat over my shoulder. Maybe an investigation of a silent meteor would peak the interest of the publishing house. I won't let this opportunity go to waste.

I will be a sun, shining on the history of research forevermore. And I won't let an eclipse dim my endeavour.

Chapter End Notes

Yo Yo Yo Yo Yoooo
I lowkey have never written a fanfic in my life before this is lowkirkuinely kinda scary.
Anyways I'm taking a break from school for who knows how long since some IDIOT

named J*ckson T*koly lowkey is starting to spread shii around my school. (I might have to move again lol
Anyways I loveee yaoi (Idk what I'm doing)
I'm actually so pissed off right now >:(.
I loved my beautiful, gorgeous, amazing, ethereal layout I had on google docs yet AO3 sucks so it looks SO UGLYYY. Ew.
Tsk tsk tsk.

Chapter 3: To Shatter Is To Succeed - Chapter I

Chapter Summary

In the present of Eclipse's new life of villainy and servitude to Lady DeVoid, he has been tasked to do the unthinkable and take Zira's life. His choice to destroy the barrier between the life he desires or to stick to his true self determines how things will look to the future. A shattered human. A broken star.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter I

To Shatter Is To Succeed

Eclipse POV: 2388 words

The world kept spinning ever since the day I laid my eyes upon my star guardian and yet my heart stayed stagnant by her side.

Her dazzling eyes were a constant memory in my head but someone as wonderful as her could never be with someone like me. This forbidden romance of ours drew me in and led me to training under the guidance of Lady DeVoid to become her arch nemesis. Even on different sides, we yearned to see each other after each encounter. She always pretended that she doesn't see it that way but I know what true love looks like.

I knelt in reverence to my dark mistress. Lady Devoid sat upon a pointed throne in the middle of the dome of darkness. Her elbow rested against her armrest and an impressed hue printed on her face.

"You seem to have mastered your powers, human," She said. "Despite your rather rough start, you have become a reliable asset to my mission."

I let out a snarky huff and flipped my blond hair, "It was nothing less than effortless." In reality, countless sleepless nights passed by during my months of training. The exam papers shoved under my bed piled up. By this point they've started to overflow. I took my void staff out of my pocket, holding it like it was muscle memory.

"I even mastered the art of the dark energy blast! Pew pew! Pew pew!"

“Yes…” Lady Devoid muttered. “That’s a basic spell, Eclipse.” The embodiment of darkness cleared her throat and sighed. “Through observing your countless attempts at apprehending the star guardian, I have been able to gather some intel on her powers. This is where your real mission starts.”

I choked on my own spit and then stumbled backwards like a rollie pollie. Real mission?! I’ve been practicing and dedicating weeks on end to my duties! Is she seriously saying all of that was for nothing!? My shins have broken more times than I can count at this point!

A rebuttal laid on my tongue but I kept it there.

“The Star Guardian gains her powers from a combination of her star shard and her magical companion.” Lady Devoid opened her palm and summoned a hologram out of the stars in the sky. A silhouetted version of the Star Guardian, Aika, was conjured alongside a visual of Hoshi. My heart raced for a split second.

“Despite her bubbly nature, the star guardian is incredibly skilful when it comes to her duties. Except, there is one weakness that can be easily exploited.” In an instance, a figure of light that represented Aika’s loser friend, Zira, manifested next to Aika. My chest ached for a brief moment. I couldn’t resent that girl, she made my star happy. Yet maybe my envy hated the way Aika looked at her with such heartfelt eyes, the way she’d be approached by the star guardian in the mundane school corridors. The way Aika called Zira her best friend.

“The mortal seems vulnerable yet it seems the Star Guardian would do anything to keep her safe. All we need to do to steal her powers is to shatter the human.”

“Shatter!?” I covered my mouth then cleared my throat. “Yes, yes that can be arranged.” I said. Shatter. Destroy. Something about taking the life of someone else felt overkill.With a snap of Lady Devoid’s fingers the visual of Zira faded into stardust. I bit my lip. The Lady of darkness furrowed her eyebrows and sighed. She was able to conclude my exact thoughts like they were her own! It was as if she was psychic…or maybe I’m just easy to read….

“Look human, you are now a servant of darkness. Eradicating a few lifeforms should be second nature to you,” Lady Devoid said with an apathetic tone. “This is simply a duty. You’ll come back with the star shard and that human girl obliterated. If you aren’t up for it then maybe I’ve chosen the wrong apprentice.”

Hearing those words almost made me throw up my own throat. I snapped my head up to face her.

“Of course not, M’Lady! You’ve chosen the right guy I promise. I can prove it to you! Please…just give me a chance.” I whispered.

A small smile tugged at the corner of my lady’s lips before she opened a portal back to the mortal realm.
“I expect nothing less than greatness, human. Show me you’re worth keeping around.”

The portal started to close, darkness engulfed me and my worldview faded to black.

I stumbled out of the bushes, twigs and berries stuck to my hair like an inescapable leech. In the middle of the clearing stood a treehouse, yet calling it a treehouse was an understatement. The cozy woodland abode towered over the blades of grass and the scattered dandelions. This was the spot where Aika and her little friend spent time after school together so of course I came here first…after walking all the way to School Mcschool memorial school only for it to be closed! What a pain…

I held up my staff to the window of the house. From here I could see the cluttered bowls of leftover batter and I could smell the aroma of fresh baked goods from the oven. The Star Guardian; Guardian of the stars’ hair faded from a glistening blond to its natural dark state. It was as if she wore her disdain for her powers for everyone to see. Despite this, her beauty was nothing less than ethereal.

I powered up my void staff at the treehouse but then diverted my attention to a collection of boulders sitting ajar in the distance.

“That’ll do the trick.”

Aika held a remote in one hand, her other was covered in cheeto dust. She grabbed a handful of chips from a party sized bowl before devouring them with her mouth open. The girl with stars in her eyes leaned back on the silken couch as she flicked through the diverse range of shows to watch. From sci-fi adventure to slice of life, it was all there.

“So you Earth people just have all of your shows on one platform! That’s sick!” Aika said in between crunches. Zira approached her with a plate of white macadamia cookies and a porcelain tea pot.

“Yeah, it’s pretty convenient,” the nerd said. “Although modern streaming services have their own controversies, I’m grateful I don’t have to go fishing for viruses often anymore.”

Zira sat down next to her best friend, fluffing the cushions gently before leaning back into what felt like clouds. She put her head against Aika’s shoulder. It was like a natural instinct. A half-witted grin grew on Aika's face.

“Cardcaptor Sakura was a favourite of mine growing up,” Zira muttered into Aika’s shoulder. She gave it a thought for just a moment. Watching a magical girl show…yuck.

“No way, how about we watch The Conjuring!”

Zira shivered at the thought. Goosebumps ran up her shoulder and her glasses fogged up the clear view of the TV. Aika clicked on the play button only for their movie session to be interrupted by an earthquake. At least that’s what Aika hoped it was. Really it could’ve been anything else but it just had to be a void! Of course her hopes had to be shattered once she took sight of the mobile stone talus. An engraving of a void symbol was etched into its head and each step it took rumbled the ground beneath it. The Star guardian dragged herself off the couch, grabbing her star shard from the jumbled pile of knick-knacks.

“Hoshi, there’s a void again!”

Hoshi zipped over with a smile on their face, “are you ready to wish on a star, Aika?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get this over with-” The whole treehouse trembled and everyone came falling out like bowling pins. Aika embraced Zira in her arms before she could hit the ground. With a flushed face and a nervous giggle, Zira let the star guardian wisp her away.

Aika placed the human in a bush by the sidelines of the clearing.
“Stay here, I’ll handle this,” She said. The confident smile on her face transformed into an expression of boredom. Her star shard extended into a whimsical magic staff but the girl raised it up and decided to wish for something more…efficient I guess.

“Pretty pretty please, I wish for a pickaxe,” with an enthusiastic squeal from Hoshi and a blinding light, Aika started picking away at the sentient rock.

This was the perfect chance! The coast was clear and Zira was left unattended. I tiptoed over like a goofy villain you’d see on a Saturday cartoon before scooping the nerd up by her beanie like a little kitten.

“Hey!” Zira stuttered, “Let go of me!”

“Only if you say the magic word.”

“Could you let go of me…please?” the nerd sighed.

“Hmm..nope!”

“Why did I think that would work??”

Zira squirmed and swung her legs in the air. I scolded her and tried to shut her mouth but in a desperate attempt to wiggle free she managed to kick me right in the ribcage. A wince escaped and I bit the inside of my mouth.

“Gasp! I landed a critical hit, ” Zira’s eyes sparkled.

“Try that again and I’ll blast you into oblivion you…you,” Damnit I couldn’t think of a good insult. Why was being a threatening villain so hard!? I grabbed the hem of her shirt and clasped her over the cliffside. Fear washed over her face, her body froze up midair.

The void shattered, debris fell to Aika’s feet alongside the cosmic cash floated down from the sky. She whipped around with a chipper grin at her face, a pure but ephemeral innocence. The star guardian’s words were caught in her mouth once she laid her eyes upon her best friend, held over her doom. Beneath Zira’s feet was an endless plane of trees.

Aika’s breath grew short. Her hands trembled. No witty banter or sarcastic remarks. The way she stood so stagnant almost ran chills through my body.

“Should’ve kept a closer eye on your friend, star guardian; guardian of the stars,” I said.

“Let her go,” Aika lifted up her staff with a nervous arm. Genuine desperation replaced her usual tone.

“Nuh-uh-uh! Take a step closer and I’ll let her go…off the cliff!” I slapped my knee and almost wheezed at my own joke. I’m hilarious! Yet the look on Aika’s face seemed like she was trying to hide how humorous that was.

“I said let her go,” Aika repeated.

“Oh come on, what about this? You give me that star shard of yours and you can have your friend back. Maybe that’ll be a more peaceful scenario.” I summoned a bolt of dark energy. Its violet shimmer radiated as I stroked the underside of Zira’s chin with my powers.

“There’s no way the star guardian would just hand over her powers like that,” Hoshi floated next to Aika. The star guardian however, wasn’t so certain in that fact. She looked down at the ground below her, I watched them have a picnic in this same spot just yesterday. Raspberry jelly and homemade egg sandwiches that fell apart in the basket. Yet the same spot those happy memories stayed seemed so cold. With a slight hesitation, Aika plucked the shard off of her forehead and dropped it into my palm. Hoshi’s shock stretched down to the ground but Aika’s solemn confession cut them off.

“I’m not sure what you want, moon man, or why you need my shard but I’m not letting you take away my friend.”

A look of concern washed over Zira’s face. She muttered Aika’s name under a soft breath.

I had the star shard in my grasp. And getting it was so…easy. Aika put up no fight for her powers, all for her. And yet even after years, the star guardian didn't even glance my way. I looked at Zira, even without words her guilt spoke through her eyes.

"If you aren't up for it then maybe I've chosen the wrong apprentice," those words rang through my head.

I held my choice in the palm of my hand. If I don't follow Lady DeVoid's orders then I'll be nowhere again. I'd have no star to guide me… I looked at Zira and then back at Aika's relinquished face.

"I…"My face scrunched, "I'm sorry, Aika. I can't go back to the way things were." I let go of Zira.

"Zira!" Aika leaped off the cliff, accidentally pushing me down with her. Even without her star shard, she jumped down to save her friend. She grabbed said star shard from my open palm and it extended into its staff form.

A blue light glistened through the night as she chanted, "Through time and space, through the threads of reality, pretty pretty please open the rift of duality." From below Zira, the fabric of reality itself opened up like a gaping maw. A portal opened up where an empty space used to be. The star shard shattered and the divided segments were sucked into the abyss.

Aika pushed me out of the way, extending her hand to Zira without a second thought about her broken staff. Zira reciprocated and reached out her hand to hold onto her friend.

Their fingers grasped at one another, barely brushing but yet not close enough. Zira and I were sucked into the portal, leaving the star guardian with no powers and one way down. Tears fell upwards from Aika's eyes, not because this was the end of her line but because she couldn't save the one person who brought back her spark. As the portal closed up, Aika closed her eyes as well.

Yet in the blink of time, Hoshi held onto the powerless guardian. Suspending her in the air while Zira and I drifted into the space between worlds.

I glanced back at Zira, floating in the void in front of me. I had everything there in my hands and yet I still failed the mission Lady DeVoid gave me. Even if I followed orders, I was left alone once again. Maybe I wasn't enough to be kept around.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Thanks for waiting for the new chapter lol. I've actually got a ton done so you guys are in for a treat in the upcoming month! Anyways I lowkey have procrasinated a Food Tech assignment which was due last week (I haven' t touched it LOL). And also these girls in like half of my classes are harassing me I hope they get suspended LMAO! I know this chapter is much longer than the prologues and it will stay around the 2k-4k range for more upcoming chapters. Also make sure to follow me on my tiktok @apple_saucee3 for more updates and even official artworks. (I tried putting them here but AO3 PMO).

Chapter 4: A Silent Descent - Chapter II

Chapter Summary

After Sylvie spotted the strange meteorite shower outside his house, the first step in order became starting an on-site investigation. Things don't go as planned when he (literally) bumps into a strange boy who claims to have fallen into the sky. They venture into the sewer only to find strange secrets hidden under Sweet Jazz City.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Just to let you know I might change the update schedule from every Friday to every Friday + Tuesday since I'm somewhat of a quick writer. Sorry about the grammar mistakes :(. New art is posted on my tiktok @apple.saucee3. (I'm still trying to figure out what all these different tags mean LOL)

Chapter II

A Silent Descent

Sylvie POV: 4128 words

The city was even more deafening in the night than it was in the daytime. Police sirens wailed throughout the districts of Sweet Jazz like they did on the regular but my head was stuck in my pocket-sized notepad.

“According to my calculations, the trajectory of the meteor must’ve led to it landing on the west side of the city…” I mumbled to myself while writing my ideas down. The shooting star fell circa ten minutes ago, I didn’t get a significant observation from my apartment yet tracking it down should be effortless for a genius like me.

To contrast the swarming crowds in the centre of town, the left of the city was barren and cold. Identical brick buildings stretched across the empty streets, the perfect roaming site for thieves and petty criminals. Despite a multitude of scoundrels roaming around, one in

particular caught my eye, the bumbling moron was down the street. He tumbled out of a dumpster with a couple stranded pennies and fish bones in his hair.

“I’m alive! I survived,” he brushed the dirt off his silly dance costume and celebrated before he fell over and kissed the concrete beneath him. Even after the idiotic demonstration, he got up and twirled on the spot multiple times, grabbing his ripped cape and posing like he was on some sort of fashion runway.

I…didn’t know how to feel. Was I baffled? Was I stunned? Or was I just surprised at how utterly stupid one guy could be. On the other side of the street was a middle aged lady and a kid with a lollipop in his hand. The young boy pointed straight at the eccentric blonde,

“Mummy! What’s that crazy guy doing over there? Is he a ballerina? Maybe he got kicked out of his dance lessons.”

The idiot’s face turned completely red, his chin crinkled and he yelled, “Say that again and I’ll smite you, you puny mortal!”

His attempt to be intimidating only left the kid with a look of repulsion. The mother gently patted the child’s back and whispered, “Stay away from crazy people, sweetie.”

With a huffed expression, the boy made a swift turn and bumped into the frame of my glasses. I winced as I fell onto my backside while the other boy had his face buried in the sidewalk yet again. With a groan, I brought myself back onto my feet, adjusting my glasses and stuffing my writing utensils back into my pocket.

“You’re excused,” I said for him.

The blonde brought his hand to his chest with an entitled gasp, “Excuse you! You should apologise for crossing paths with I, Eclipse; servant of darkness! My powers are beyond your comprehension and I-” The boy kept on rambling and rambling. It’s like he never learnt his mouth could close. How could one person make so much noise without communicating anything substantial whatsoever?

I didn’t have time for this, I had more important matters to attend to. In my attempt to leave the man with a cape talking to himself on the other side of the road, he caught onto my evasion after a while and started following me. The boy bombarded me with demands and questions about where he could find the closest inn. Something about his cape being torn and not being able to teleport or something. The worst thing about people who are unaware of how obnoxious they are is that they’re stubborn and awfully persistent. He accompanied me as I scanned the area for potential meteor landing sites, leaning over my shoulder as I recorded my investigation.

After a while of useless blabbering he basically just blended into the hectic activity of the night. Lost in my own world, I kept walking down the street. I'd eventually have to acknowledge the elephant in the room so I might as well get it over with. I turned around to see his face reddened. Steam exuded out his ears like a vintage teapot.

"You're still here?" I asked.

The boy who had once been a chatterbox froze right there in his ridiculous shoes. He stood still like a lamp post built into the pavement.

"You dare to ignore me? Me!" He yelled, "Your ignorance to my presence is insulting! Don't you know who I am?! My name is-"

"What is your problem?"

"**My** problem!? You've been defying my demands and ignoring my questions for long enough, Mr Glasses. I find it only suitable to obliterate you!" 'Eclipse', or whatever he said his name was, took out what seemed to be a toy staff a kid would buy with his pocket money. He pointed it at my neck as if he was trying to be threatening. I pushed the wand down with one finger and corrected him, "Dr. Glasses."

"Yeah yeah, whatever," he retorted.

With a bleak expression I flicked his forehead and the so- called servant of darkness winced like a stupid pup.

"I'll have you know that I don't pay respect to dumpster junkies with a ripped cape and a toy wand," I said. "I'm Sylvester Ashling, a teen prodigy with a PHD in psychology (and modern linguistics). This might surprise you but not everyone has time for delusional antics so how about you go bother someone else?"

Eclipse clutched his shirt like a grandma who caught the sight of an ankle for the first time. "Excuse you! This is not some feeble toy wand. This is a staff which holds an unimaginable amount of pure dark energy. In the name of Lady Devoid, I shall shatter you! I'll burn you to ashes!"

"Oh yeah? Do it then," I held my arms out with a cocky smirk on my face.

"I'll do it! I'm serious!"

"You won't"

"Would too!"

I stuck out my tongue and blew a raspberry in his face, he did the same. I rolled my eyes at the childish display. Attempting to engage with a fool was certainly a waste of time. I can't

believe I let a dude like him into my head!

“Well you have fun with your…darkness thing or whatever. I have research to engage in”

I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk to jot down a couple notes about the surroundings. It seems that no place in particular had suffered notable damage although piles of litter and used cigarettes covered the ground like usual. With an unusual silence, Eclipse leaned over to read my notes.

“Yeesh, I get why you called yourself a doctor,” he said. I didn’t bother to shoot a glare at him. No petty jab at my handwriting would cost me anything. Besides, as long as I can read my notes then it should be fine…

“What’s this silent meteor business? I’m pretty sure they always appear silent, genius”

“As if you’d know anything about astronomy,” I said.

“I’m actually an expert on stars,” despite that blatant lie, an interested highlight flashed in Eclipse’s eye.

“Yeah sure,” I said. “Actually, I was wondering if you know anything about the meteor shower which passed through this area half an hour ago. You seem to inhabit these streets, probably that trash can. Did you see any unusual occurrences recently?”

Eclipse put one hand on his hip then flipped his golden hair, “You must be mistaken, I don’t reside in these parts. In a battle against my arch nemesis, she sent me away through a rift between dimensions! I fell from the sky and landed wherever ‘here’ is! Our combat was harsh and she only managed to overpower me with dirty tricks.” He stood there for a good while. He looked at me. I looked at him… and then I bursted out into an exaggerated laughter.

“Oh!” I said between cackling, “That’s priceless!”

“Don’t you belittle me! I’m telling the truth,” Eclipse said.

“Oh please! If I fell for such childish tales, I wouldn’t call myself a genius.”

“Well if you were a genius you wouldn’t have spelt ‘endeavor’ wrong,” the blonde took my pen and scribbled out my writing to add a grammar correction to my notation. I reached out to grab my pen from his grubby hands but he pushed his hand against my cheek.

“That’s the British spelling!”

“Well how about you get me a cup of tea and a bickie while you’re at it!?”

“How about you just leave me alone,” amidst our bickering session, he pushed my notepad out of my hand and it tumbled into the sewer drain on the side of the road. I pounced over to clasp it in my grasp but it was too late. Half a year’s worth of observations, of diagrams, of inescapable boredom and the doodles which were proof of it were gone! Just like that.

I stood up. The city was eerily desolate at that moment. The occasional flick of a lighter or the rants of emotional passerbies were absent. Eclipse didn’t seem bothered, to him that was just a notepad filled with meaningless scribbles. He couldn’t understand the weight of his actions or the fact that the only reason people respected me was literally down the drain. I clutched my fists, the banter we’ve been exchanging since we met turned to silence. It was as if on instinct, I snatched the toy wand and stormed off, leaving the blondie confused and waving his hands around.

“Hey! What’s the big deal,” Eclipse asked.

“I’m going to get my notepad back,” I responded.

That boy started to pick up the pace behind me, he patted my shoulder and shrugged like it was no big deal, “oh come on, that thing is probably soaked by now! Give it a break.”

“I don’t care!” If there was any chance that my research wasn’t completely lost then I had to take it. Who was I without my intelligence? I needed proof of my worth back.

A kilometre or two ahead was a manhole which acted as an entrance to the city sewer system. The sharp point on the staff’s strange crescent moon design acted as an effective screwdriver. I managed to handle it open, sweeping the cover to the side.
“Is that legal?” Eclipse asked. I didn’t answer. He followed after me as I descended into the sewers. Unfiltered liquid substances dripped from the pipes which ran across the walls of the dark hallway. In between the uneven bricks created a home for rodents. The air carried a familiar sewage mustiness, the smell of waste and rotten food. We sludged our way through the dirty waters, Eclipse grunting and pulling the ends of his pants up like a princess. I, however, was too busy searching for my notepad to care about my wet socks. Without a proper map or a diagram, navigating the many forks in the road was difficult. As I analysed the two paths up ahead that diverged from each other, Eclipse tapped my shoulder and said,

“If I learnt anything in my life, I know to never turn left at the crossroads.”

“So you just gamble a 50/50 chance every time?”

“Well it works”

“Sure it does,” I said before turning left.

“Hey! Where are you going? You’re gonna get us killed!”

Eclipse waved his hands around in the air, pointing at the other path while his voice faded into the background. Ignoring the screaming and whining from a distance, I caught a glimpse of something in the water up ahead. I sprinted over, picked it up and a grin grew on my face. My notebook!... except the contents were completely smudged. Ink bled through the crumpled pages and pierced my equally crumpled heart. Even someone with top tier eyesight wouldn’t be able to decipher this shit! The idiot came prancing by before tripping head first into the sewage. He coughed and choked on his own saliva before getting up and spitting out whatever bacteria he just swallowed. I kept my attention to the drenched notepad. He held out his hand.

“Can I have my staff back?” Eclipse asked. I didn’t answer this time either. He waved in my face then flicked my forehead.

“Ow!” I yelped, “I’m not giving it back. Look what you did to my notes! My future is ruined and it’s all your fault!”

“I disagree.”

“I-” In an attempt to wrap around this guy’s backwards logic, I sputtered. “You can’t just disagree!”

“I disagree with that too.” He reached over to grab the wand from me but I copied his poor tactics and pushed his face away. We looked like toddlers trying to fight over a toy. Which we were (minus the toddler part). And yet again, our cat fight led to him knocking the wand out of my hands and falling on top of me. We tumbled against a wall only for the bricks to fall apart when we came into contact with it for support.

Our collapse was greeted by a flight of stairs, lasting for what felt like an eternity until the force of our fall slowed down at the bottom. Once our rolling came to a harsh halt, I pressed my glasses up and kicked him in the ribcage. He coughed, jumped and fell backwards as I tidied the dust off my lab coat.
“Hey! My ribs have suffered enough for one day,” Eclipse said. I scanned the peculiar new surroundings I was met with. It seems we ended up in a ruined temple well cared for by time and filled with wonders beyond anything seen before. Torn tapestries hung up on the wall. My fingers ran past the foreign ciphers carved into rusted statues. What this location held and what legends they depicted were a mystery but one thing was clear. I was stoked.

“Eclipse, look around at the historical wonders! This place is ancient,” I ran around the halls taking pictures of every intricate detail I could find. I instinctively pulled out my research journal from my pocket only to throw the remnants of what used to be aside. Eclipse picked up his rod from the floor and turned it on like a torch.

“I’m glad your toy has a light feature,” I said.

“It’s a light spell, Glasses.”

“Same thing,” I didn’t have time for the boy’s stupid comments, I had a thesis to write!

We continued our venture through the dark corridors. Dust decorated each relic and a variety of statues were placed along the grand hall. Each of them evenly spaced out.

I squatted down to take photos of all the symbols in each body of text. At the end of the passageway was a dome of ancient murals. Pictures of prophecies and primitive human portrayals were displayed across the curved walls.

“This is an amazing discovery! These ruins show events which haven’t been charted in history! It could define my career,” I jumped and squealed like a teenage girl at a concert.

“I thought you specialised in psychology,” Eclipse said.

“My career as a clinical psychologist is a temporary thing. Once I get my name out with the thesis of the century, I’ll be set for life!!” Eclipse held up his torch to brighten the photos I was taking. A barely audible, ‘thank you’ escaped by accident but Eclipse didn’t seem to notice. On the wall in the centre of the room was a carving of three warriors facing against a looming threat. The blondie pointed at the individual in the middle, the one who possessed a staff with a crescent moon on its tip.

“This dashing fellow look familiar?”

“Oh please, like a deluded idiot would be featured in an ancient prophetic artwork,” I said. My head snapped back around to the other depictions around the room.

“You never know. That could be me and my own legion of darkness facing the will of the stars,” Eclipse said.

The carvings on the walls were detailed yet one focal point stood out. A figure of a horned lady. She stood proud. Even the stars which were sculpted on the same wall were outshone by her presence. Eclipse’s eyes squinted.

“That sort of looks like…” his trail of thought wandered off.

While looking around the room I noticed something down the far end of the hallway…

Something was wrong.

I didn't pay much attention to it before but the statues down the hallway had inched closer to the door. It was subtle, almost hard to notice. But when I turned away for a brief moment and looked back… another pair of parallel statues got closer.

"Eclipse…" The other boy was still absorbed in the mural, "it's time to go!"

"What happened to 'writing a thesis?" Eclipse said in a mocking nerdy voice. When he turned around, the stone statue towered over us in the centre of the room. Inaudible whispers hustled through the room. The head stretched up, almost mechanically. Its neck was elongated. Then luminescent arms shot out of the statue pierced through the walls. Its man-made spear illuminated.

"You were right," Eclipse pulled my arm and rushed for the exit.

"Of course I was!"

Each benevolent statue in the corridor latched onto its surroundings. Climbing the walls like an army of spiders. A strange energy missile just missed, leaving a smoked segment on my sleeve. Turn left. Up the stairs. Where I was hesitant, Eclipse acted on impulse. I snapped back to see an army of built soldiers crowding each wall behind us.

I pulled out my yoyo, the orange glow of my epithet engulfed it. With a swift motion, the yoyo's head knocked a couple down from the ceiling. The ones which missed the direct hit grew drowsy from my epithet dust. The blue light in their eyes diminished, leaving a blockage of statues on the floor. Yet my effort to deter the enemies was ineffective as the rest of them crawled over it.

My phone slipped from my pocket. That was my evidence! The only photos of those ruins were left in the dust.
"Just run," Eclipse yelled. The unnatural limbs from the stone warriors crushed the phone screen. Leaving cracks on the well-maintained device.

With my powers, I called upon a wall of sheep, blocking the statue's path. But they had a killer instinct and no ulterior motive besides burying us six feet down. The statues rammed through the fluffy sheep and they rolled on the ground before dissipating back into energy.

"Oh come on," I said. The cold lights of the sewer shined at the end of the stairwell. So close yet my legs felt as if they were about to give out on me. The adrenaline boosted energy started to dwindle. Maybe living on a diet made entirely of instant noodles wasn't the best

idea…

The blonde looked back at me. I let out inconsistent pants, my back hunched over. Eclipse grunted and used his last bits of strengths to throw me over his shoulder. The horde of statues made their way up the stairs. Even Eclipse's urgent pace and my attempts at swatting them away were no use! The statues couldn't be stopped. Once we made it to the top, I was thrown into the grimy sewage. That toy staff charged up in the other boy's hands. Eclipse looked at the swarm of enemies, aim set on the front line. But once the darkness swelled at the toy wand;s bulb, the energy blast shot up at the ceiling instead.

The temple entrance overflowed with debris and minerals, closing the statues on the other side of the wall. Slight taps pressed up against the fallen rocks but they fell dormant after a while. I took in a deep breath, gathering my awareness again. Eclipse turned to me, sweat ran down his forehead.

"You ok?" He asked in between breaths.

"Yeah…" I muttered. "I could've handled it myself but thanks I guess." What even was that? First a meteor shower, then this strange boy who claims to have fallen from the sky and now an army of paranormal killer statues!? And still, I had no evidence to show for any of these events besides the moron in front of me. Why was this happening? What did those murals depict and why did Eclipse's face wash over with recognition when he saw that horned lady? And what was the deal with Eclipse's staff?

This investigation led to more questions than answers. But even after a life threatening encounter, that feeling of curiosity remained.

The wannabe villain stuck his head out of the manhole, extending a hand out and helping me up onto my feet. That sense of relief after merely escaping was short-lived though. Police sirens wailed through the usually empty streets. Officers reported back through their walkie-talkies, the scent of donuts emitted from their uniforms.

The surrounding area was encircled with traffic cones and barrier tape.

"This is almost the sixth incident this month," said an officer with a keen eye who stood apart from the rest. Most of the police force in the city wore their badges lopsided and their hats tilted on an angle. Percival King, however, had her shirt tucked in at all times. Her hair was swept back to keep her attention on criminals and even her sword would've lost against her in a sharpness competition. Not only was she a diligent force, Percy was also the lady who approached me in the museum.

Damn it!

I pulled my hoodie over my head and fluffed up my bangs.

“Percival, if we keep stopping by to deal with ordeals like this then we’ll be thrown off the Giovanni Potage case,” another officer said. Percy turned to face him, her face was composed but not expressionless.

“Helping the citizens of Sweet Jazz is our duty, no matter how miniscule the task may be,” She replied. “Now, what are you two young men doing in this part of town?”

I fidgeted around with the tip of my lab coat. Eclipse answered with a shrug and a vague comment about being a lost tourist. A hum escaped Percy’s lips,

“Well you two should be heading back to your accommodation. It’s unsafe for you boys to be out past midnight. The streets aren’t exactly welcoming to newcomers.”

“Aha! Will do,” I chuckled and clutched Eclipse’s torn cape with sweaty palms. “Come on, let’s get going-”

“I can offer you a ride home if you need assistance,” Percival cut me off.

“No, we’re good! Thanks for the offer!”

“Well…if you insist. Just keep out of trouble and make sure to have an eye on the road,” the officer pointed at a boy with stuffy curled hair. He was covered in soot and his broken arm was stuck in a thumbs up. An explosive odour still lingered on the motorcycle tracks leading into the manhole and it was smelt worse from the remains of what used to be a bike which was jabbed into the side of a building.

“Our poor friend Fred over here has been getting into many accidents over the past year,” Percy said. “ If you encounter some knockups like him without taking the proper road precautions, then it won’t end well.”

The officer trailed on but honestly I was more focused on my shaky shins. The more she rambled about safety and citizen responsibility, the closer I got to a heart attack. If she recognised me from the museum, the number of criminal associations I’ve had in the past week would put me into question.
“Poor guy,” Percy lamented. “His fate was met with an unscrewed manhole. Just when he was recovering too. Whoever irresponsible citizen left this manhole open would have been held accountable for vandalism, minor destruction of property and even the consequences of indirectly causing vehicle related injuries. Say, you didn’t happen to see the one behind this did you?”

I swallowed a gulp down my throat. Eclipse gave me a sheepish glance. In the moment, there was nothing else I could do. It was childish. And immature of an intelligent individual such as myself. Despite this, I raised a finger at Eclipse and he mirrored back at me.

“It was him!!” we yelled in unison.

“Just as I suspected,” Percy clipped a pair of eraser cuffs around our wrists. “You two are hereby under arrest for previously stated offences and trespassing into sewers without authorisation” I scoffed and looked up at the officers.

“It wasn’t my idea!”

“It was your idea,”Eclipse said.

“You don’t understand, officer! I’m innocent. We were just pursuing an academic venture!” The other officers pushed us into the car. The leather seats were slightly ripped on the edges. The foggy car windows closed, blocking the city scent from outside.

“You can argue such cases in court.”

Chapter 5: Splintered complications - Chapter III

Chapter Summary

After being trapped in the rift between worlds, Zira found herself falling into the headquarters of Bliss Ocean. She bumped into a strange Cowgirl wizard, or at least that's what she seemed to be. Zira thought becoming Zora's apprentice would lead to wonder and magical adventures (which she wasn't wrong about) but things didn't end up as expected when she was handed a splintered broom instead of a magical moon tiara. What did Zira get herself into?

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry for the late chapter lmao I think the AO3 curse caught up to me. Enjoy the new chapter and I might explain what happened at the end. I might have to move schools (again)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter III

Splintered complications

Zira POV: 4503 words

“Aika!” In the midst of a rapid descent, I reached up to my friend’s helping hand. Even as I approached the ground, all I could think about was her at that moment. One gasp. One final glance through my fingertips. That’s the last I saw of my Aika. The one girl who made me feel extraordinary.

The abyss caught me in a chokehold. The adrenaline floated up from my body as if it was weightless. My arms stretched out in the open void, my hair drifted up like it was playing follow the leader with my palm. It was almost calm in a way, maybe carefree? I always thought being thrust into the void between worlds would feel suffocating but it was as if I was floating through the ocean. The ring in my ears blurred out into white noise. An underwater bliss washed over me even if I wasn’t underwater. I wasn’t sure if I was anywhere at all.

I caught a glimpse of Eclipse, straying away behind me from the opening between worlds. A suppressed sense of guilt weighed heavy on his eyelids.

Eclipse wasn't serious, he never was. He flaunted around like tuxedo mask did in the first episode, showing up but barely doing much. Aika treated him like a joke who ran around in a cape since all he did was summon a few voids or steal a handful of cookies on occasion. But the one time his heart turned cold, the one time he decided to take things further as a villain, the enthusiasm in his eyes was absent.

Was he hesitant?

What if it reminded him of his evil tragic backstory…

Or maybe he was just unsure.

Unsure of what? Who knows. People like him have always had everything figured out. Eclipse is a villain and that's the role he found for himself. Yet I still wander through life being nothing less than ordinary and yet, I'm not even good at being normal.

I was pulled out of my spiralling thoughts when the floor beneath me vanished. Instead of an empty landscape, I was met with a beautifully illustrated sky. Twinkling in the distance were an array of stars which reflected onto the copious taiga biome below. Four other shooting stars fell to the distant horizon alongside Eclipse and I. My scream got louder the closer I descended to the ground.

Holy stars, what do I do?!

I attempted to swim through the sky but tactics like that only worked in anime.

I clasped onto a cloud but it dissolved into water vapour the second it came into contact with my fingertips.

My body couldn't tell if it wanted to freeze up or if it wanted to flail around like a headless chicken. Was this really it? I'm just going to let the force of gravity pull me down and accept the end of my unsubstantial life. I didn't get to go to college or start animating my magnum opus. I haven't even collected all of the moon sailor manga!

But really, there was nothing I could do. I can't change the course of fate or turn back the wheel of time. The one thing I learnt in my life was that I can't do anything to change the world. But even so, I could appreciate the bright city lights which illuminated my last view.

I closed my eyes. A poet would've taken a last breath but I was too busy thinking of an iconic line as my last sentence. Even after all of the fanfictions I wrote, my mind went blank… maybe 'goodbye cruel world?' It was simple enough.

I crashed through the roof of a high rise building, it stood tall in the heart of the cityscape. I fell through the roof, the top floor of a skyscraper was a less daunting fall than the actual ground but a devastating one nonetheless. Chunks and pieces of the roof scattered around my limp body…but somehow, I felt fine? Instead of the harsh floor, I landed on what seemed like a bubble. The translucent substance was held together by a segment of Aika's star shard. The bubble imploded back into its source, setting me down on the tiles.

The shard rested in my palm, it was only one point of the star which had broken when Aika casted that portal spell. She leaped off a cliff without a second thought. What was going through her head? Even if she was reckless, I couldn't help but envy her courage.

The city was lit up with hues of pink and frost touched buildings. My hand pressed against the window and between each finger held a sight to behold. A lone museum on the edges of the city next to a busy downtown marketplace and even a building made of architectural genius, filled with vintage pillars and stained glass windows. My hometown was filled with the same ordinary houses across each street and block with limited spots to hang out. The same suburban fences which my neighbours loved to yell over. It often led to me and Aika spending the week in her house but here, it felt as if everywhere was filled with adventurous opportunities. All of this. Right here in the palm of my hand.

Ok Zira, one step at a time. The first thing in order is to figure out where the hell 'here' is anyway. It didn't look like the sort of places in magazines, knowing Aika she probably would've sent me to school again.

I could be in a technologically advanced sci-fi location! Or a mystical planet of witches who have studied the stars to replicate cities from Earth! I doubt this place would be home to anthropomorphic frog people but that'd be cool too! Who knows? I could see an amphibian walk out of that elevator right now!

The numbers on top of the golden elevator doors skimmed through a variety of roman numerals which were engraved into the wall. A golden light bulb accompanied the other cold lights in the office hallway, radiating from the signals on both sides of the elevator. I stood there, observing the mechanisms of the contraption, taking a good second or two to realise that the doors opening meant that there was actually someone inside. A certain someone keen to walk out and spot the giant hole in the roof of their building! I snapped my head around the room, an empty hallway made of the same grey tiles and abstract portraits. The only hiding spot I could squeeze into in time was between a couple of potted plants. It was claustrophobic but it worked. Footsteps clanked against the sleek flooring on the far end of the office building's hallway, the two vases squished me together. I expected a brooding office lady or one of those high end businessmen you'd find in your typical YA novella. Maybe even a well dressed toad, anything but a cowgirl.
Her sandstone hat dimmed the view of her face and a relaxed grin stood out from the shadows. A smile too stretched out yet not stretched out enough. She walked past the massive

hole in the roof but the tilt of her hat's brim concealed her eyes. The Cowgirl raised her arm up, pushing her poncho out of the way, to a touchpad with a hand shaped indent inside. She took off her glove, scrolled through the different models and landed on one which fitted her hand perfectly. Then, the silver doors slid open automatically but she spread out her arms like she opened it herself. Just for some extra flare.

A meeting table stretched out further than it needed for the three people in the room. A girl with pink twintails was snapping her fingers back and forth while a cloaked individual sat with her arms crossed on the other side of the table. The light of a closeby monitor reflected off her sunglasses. Once the cowgirl's line of sight stepped out of my vicinity, I peeked from behind the potted plant to observe the unusual scenario.

A screen flickered for a brief second and a blackened silhouette projected themself onto the screen. His purely white eyes stuck out from his darkened features.

"So, is the amulet effective, Zora?" The voice on the other end was deep, almost distorted. Zora shrugged and twirled a green amulet on her index finger. The brilliant chain rattled in her grasp.

"Oh, it's been great! Ya' know I managed to get this on my way back." The amulet glowed, the same colour enveloped Zora's body. The greenish hue shifted to a cooler blue, extending out into a sharp-edged sword of water from her hand. Her eyes sparkled, clutching the power in her fist. In one rapid movement, she propelled it against the window, the blade cutting through with the precision of a scalpel.

"Impressive, I knew I could count on you," the monitor said.

"Shouldn't we close the door?" The cloaked girl rested back in her cushioned chair. "We are discussing confidential matters after all." Zora twisted her head towards me. With an unnatural speed, a threatening spark glistened from her dark eye. I tumbled back into the potted plants, my breath catching itself within my throat. Zora's glare lingered and remained in place but she brushed it off with her usual grin.

"Relax, Moot. There's no one around," Zora retorted.

The meeting didn't go on for too long. Honestly it felt more like those situations when the teacher takes you out of a boring class only for you to miss a minute or two of the lesson. Zora walked out of the meeting room and once the door shut she kicked over the plant. I screeched, the weight pushing against me on the floor. Zora just snickered.

"Oh that was golden! You really thought you were being discreet." I gulped, sweat ran down my face faster than it did in PE. I waved my hands around, almost a thousand apologies ran through my head but only an unfathomable scramble of sounds managed to come out.

“I am so sorry! I didn’t mean to fall through your roof or break into your office building,” I sat up, adjusting my glasses while backing slowly to the elevator. “This will never happen again! I promise, I’ll pay for renovations! I have a bit of savings and it might not be enough but I’ll scrub the floors and I’ll do your paperwork!”

Zora stood there, I couldn’t tell if it was astonishment or anger which covered her face. The silence left only my beating heart and rapid panting to be heard. Yet the quiet atmosphere was shattered by a single slap on the knee. Zora threw her head back and cackled like a drunk hillbilly, the crazy ones you’d find in the corner of a tavern sipping beer in a fantasy RPG. She wiped the few tears which came out of her squinted eyes and continued her laughing hysteria. My face reddened. I pulled my beanie over my flushed cheeks…just kill me.

“No big deal, kiddo! Though, that paperwork deal sounds dandy.” Zora stuffed the amulet into her back pocket and spat on her hand. Her saliva ran down the surface of her red gloves, “The name’s Zora. I’m sure I could handle a new apprentice.”

She extended her arm for a handshake, something I’ve never done before. I was saving my first handshake for the job interview and the local boba shop, or at least someone with cleaner hands. I winced before slowly colliding with her sticky palm. Zora yanked my grasp and started shaking my arm up and down like I was a rag doll. My attempt at an introduction turned into a shaky response, “Nice to meet you, I’m Zira.”

Zora let me down with a good ol’ chuckle and patted my back, “That’ll get too confusin’ for my colleagues. How about Zeebs? You look like a Zeebs.”

I nodded my head at the nickname…I guess that's one request off of my bucket list.

“So, what’s the deal? You have parents or somethin’?”

“Oh,” I said. “I have parents, it's just that they’re…faraway.” A look of recognition plastered on Zora’s face,
“Ah! I’m guessin’ you’re a Deepwood girlie,” she said. “What’s the tale? You ran away to Sweet Jazz to pursue a life of freedom and the arts? Don’t sweat it, you’re not special.”

My heart laid heavy on that last part, even if it was just a passing comment. Zora threw a glance over at the broken plant pots, then at the hole in the ceiling. “It’s a miracle you survived that! Cleaning bodies gets repetitive every now and then,” she said. “You’re off the hook kid, holes like that can be fixed in no time!”

I let out a sigh of relief. If she got even slightly mad at me, who knows how that would’ve ended? The golden firearm on her belt was one warning to keep on Zora’s good side, the

strange aura she gave off was another.

The spit evaporated off of Zora's hand and was replaced by another surge of power, this time it shone a golden shade. It became the only bright hue as the world's landscape drained of colour. One segment of the roof rose up. Then another. Piecing itself back together into its previous state. Once the world dispersed of its monotone colour scheme, the ceiling was blocked off. A repaired replica of its memory.

Zora brushed it off like it was some casual occurrence. I, however, couldn't seem to keep my glasses straight.

"Gasp, are you a wizard!?" A crooked grin plastered on my face, my fists scrunching up together. If I got any more excited my hands would probably explode from the pressure! Maybe this world wasn't so bad! In Zora's guidance, I could learn magic and go on adventures! This is practically heaven! It's everything I've ever wanted, besides becoming a magical girl but this was a close second.

"Ha, you're hilarious! Maybe you do have a chance in the comedy industry if that's what you're here for," Zora said.

"Uhh, thanks?" I shook my head, "So you're like a magical cowgirl with time powers or something! And you have a gun!? You'd be the perfect smash bros character. Could you teach me your ways?"

"Hold on, I guess I could pull a couple lessons out of my back pocket. But first you gotta repeat after me." Zora cleared her throat, knocked on her chest and said, "I believe in you!"

"You believe in me?"

"No no no," Zora said. "You believe in yourself."

"I believe in myself!"

"There we go, now let's get this show on the road!"

"Eeee! Where do we start!?"

I'm in hell. One brush. One sweep against the burgundy carpet. Then do that again… I panted, my hands fell to my knees. Zora just kind of threw a broom at me then walked off. The flimsy broom stabbed into my hands each time I went to sweep the floor. There were more splinters on my hands than there was skin! When would this end? Even my room never got this spotless but the second I finished sweeping the area, an employee would spill his coffee or the fibers started falling off my well-worn cleaning tool as I worked on yet another

dirty spot. The encouraging comments Zora threw out every once in a while in passing started to wear on me. Her cockney accent was a charming character trait…but it was starting to get annoying.

“I believe in myself,” I said.

“I…believe in myself?” I questioned.

“I believe in myself,” I convinced myself…but it wasn’t really believable.

The right wing of the premises was occupied by hallways of living corners. A person or two came out of the room every once in a while but it was mostly just me and Zora whenever she came to check on me. She leaned on the grandfather clock behind me and placed her poncho and hat combo on it.

“So,” I mumbled. “You guys said you were an organisation? What do you guys exactly do at uh..”

“Bliss Ocean?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Zeebs. We’re a benevolent organisation who specialises in advocating for the rights of the non-inscribed,” Zora said. “But that’s just what it says on our flyer. Most people call us a mundie terrorist group.”

I hummed, Zora had been spouting strange words all night but ‘mundie’ was something I haven’t seen on synonym lists.

“A mundie?” I hesitated. Would it be weird to ask her something which felt like basic lingo?

“Ya’know! The people without epithets,” the Cowgirl answered as if she read my mind.

“What’s an epithet?”

Zora suppressed a snigger, “Wow, I’ve been travellin’ for a while but I’ve never met anyone above the age of five who doesn’t know what an epithet is!”

My face flushed in a panic, “I-...just forget I said anything!”

“Nah nah, I can spare an explanation. Epithets are unique powers related to some soul-word ya have.” Zora scratched behind her ear, her sentence drifted off but then it came back as she touched the broom in my hand. The damages glistened, a golden light emitted from the cracks between the wood like the ceiling an hour ago. Then, it dropped onto the floor in the form of a huge wooden plank.

“Ah- what did you do!?”

“Just demonstratin’, pretty cool huh?” With a flick of her finger, Zora turned the plank into a freshly repaired broomstick.

“Good as new!”

“You…could’ve done that the whole time?” I examined my bruised hands, wooden chips were still pierced into them from the hours I spent cleaning with a broken broomstick.

“Ha! You should’ve seen the look on your face,” Zora laughed. “Now, I gotta sort out the paperwork you’ll be doing. You know how to file…I don’t know, a tax report?”

I stumbled to find a reply. I learnt a couple techniques back in class so I nodded with a thumbs up.

“Good good, I’ll seeya around, Zeebs. Don’t die while I’m gone,” The Cowgirl twirled her gun then grabbed the end of it with an instantaneous twirl. She blew a nonexistent smoke cloud from the tip of her firearm then walked into the ‘sunset’ on the ‘horizon.’ (The light which came from the broken lamp.) That would’ve been the perfect moment for a western guitar motif.

Once the hallways were left desolate, the floors became my main focus again. The grandfather clock in the middle of the hallway clicked slightly as seconds went by. Crickets groaned in boredom, it wasn’t like I couldn’t relate. It was my own fault it ended up this way…but if Zora could repair my broom with her ‘epithet’ then couldn’t she just clean the room herself in an instant? I’m starting to wonder if she’s doing this on purpose.

A slight sense of peace dripped into the monotonous motions of the broom. But the peaceful atmosphere was abruptly disturbed by a sudden crash from the window. I coughed on the dust particles which drifted through the air, the wall I just cleaned was now destroyed into pieces. A silhouetted trio of girls stood with their hands on their hips and once the smoke was deterred, they all struck a unique pose. Although, their group dynamic was quite…disjointed. They stood like the Heathers from Heathers; the musical. Their dango coloured hairstyles stood out from their eccentric yellow uniforms.

“Stand before us, Bliss Ocean! For we, the banzai blasters, shall take our Vice principal's glory back from you, Zora Salazar!”

The blonde girl on the left whipped around, “Hey! I thought we agreed that was my line!”

“Well I’m in the middle this time!”

“Well I’m the appointed leader!”

“Since when did we decide that?”

I chuckled nervously next to the frantic bickering between the two ‘banzai blasters.’ Their argument escalated as their quarrels started walking off into who was eating the most of their rations. It was like this for a while but the second I tried stepping away, the green-haired and only competent member of the squad pointed me out.

“Hey! Don’t think you can get away, janitor girl! Or you’ll face the wrath of our peashooters!” All three of them held up what seemed to be water guns like a hivemind.

“Oh, you said you were looking for Zora, correct?” I asked, “Well she went down the hall to her office.”

“Oh.” The girls put their peashooters down, “Thanks, gal!” Without a second thought, the trio scurried down the hallway like they were in a spy movie without a director. When the girl who was at the front stopped, they all came to a halt. It reminded me of a looney toons show in a way…

“Hey! That cleaner kid could be tricking us,” the girl with pink hair said. The other two mimicked a gasp track before turning around with their aims set on me.

“You won’t trick us with your Bliss Ocean…buffonery!” The blonde girl said before turning to the others and whispering, “that’s how you use that word, right?” The other two nodded.

“I’m telling the truth,” I said between stutters. Was that the correct decision though? If they left me alone I’d be able to continue my job but what if Zora got pissed that I ratted her out? Her gun looked more painful than whatever toys these girls were running around with.

“Actually,” I continued. “I was lying! Because I’m… an evil..liar?” The three of them gasped again. They were coordinated but in a messy manner at the same time. It was almost unsettling.

“How dare you! You’ll pay for your heinous crime,” the pink leader said while confidently mispronouncing the word ‘heinous.’ They lined up and started shooting actual bullets across the room. I yelled for help while flailing around the hall. The grandfather clock acted as a good place for cover but I couldn’t stay for long. Those girls had flimsy aims but they were persistent! They just kept spamming their triggers until something worked.

Then I remembered it. I took out the star shard which was tucked inside my beanie. Despite its fragmented state, the shard emitted an intense energy. Moon Sailor always said that before you could be a hero you had to take a stand first. I’ve always faded into the background though. How did Aika use this thing again? What if I went out there and looked like an idiot? “I believe in myself,” I whispered.

I stuck my head out from behind the clock. Two bullets shot right above me. Then a third. The grandfather clock tipped zora's garments onto my body, her hat falling perfectly on my head. One girl pointed at me, "Guys! It's Zora Salazar!" My hands stopped trembling. The poncho had residue of burnt ash and the stench of sweat invaded my nose. Yet, something about wearing the unwashed piece of clothing made something stir within me. The sort of confidence which would appear when I wore a mask. It was like I was the magical girl this time!

With widened eyes, I coughed and held the star up.

"Yes, That's me! Zi-ora Salazar?" The three banzai blasters put their hands on their faces. I can't believe that actually worked.

"And I will destroy you with my epithet," I said. A triangle of bullets shot at me but I dodged them with ease. Instead of the star shard bouncing out of my hands, it remained still in my palms. The brim of my hat tipped over my eyes but the lack of sight just increased my senses.

"Pretty pretty please…" I didn't know where I was going with that actually. But then my mouth moved on its own! "I wish you guys would go away!" The banzai blasters froze in their boots.

"Wait what?" The energy from the fragment demolished their guns and sent them flying in the air. With one star-blast, the three banzai blasters were shot out the window they came from. My head emerged from the building, leaning down to check on them from the second floor.

"Are you guys ok?!" Did I just commit murder? With a star beam!? The self-proclaimed team leader spat on the ground, holding her fist up at me.

"We will get back at you, Zi-ora Salazar! If it's the last thing we do!" I let out a small chuckle.

"Ok then, see you soon," I said. Taking off Zora's poncho, I couldn't help but rest my hand against my chest. My heart was still pounding from that moment. I defeated some bad guys all by myself.

"Oh that was hilarious," said a familiar voice. Behind me was Zora who submerged the room with her epithet. The bullet shots on the walls were restored to its former glory, alongside the torn up carpet and broken window.

"How'd you mess the room up so badly? I left you for like ten minutes!" Once the poncho came off, my quick thinking did too. My head scrambled for a couple seconds before landing on, "An earthquake. An Earthquake happened but only one this side of the building!"

“Ah! Those pesky tectonic plates,” Zora said. “Natural disasters always have a mind of their own, don't they?” Zora threw her head back once again and I joined her strange laughing fit. She slapped my back, the black frames of my glasses almost tripped over.

“I actually wanted to hand you this,” Zora said, taking a rusted key out of her pocket. The key jingled against a soda tab which was attached to it. “The streets of sweet jazz are pretty risky compared to Bellmouth. Since you’re my little helper now you deserve your own room.”

Zora pushed the key into the dark wood door behind me. The room looked well-loved in a way. A vase of petunias sat on the desk, underneath a creaky loft bed which had some wear and tear. I took off my shoes, walking on the coarse carpet which emulated a similar design to the one I spent an hour cleaning up. Zora tossed the key in the air, the blunt edge hitting my forehead and landing into my hands. At least it got into the goal.

“This room’s all yours now! Hell, destroy the walls for the next person would ya?” I looked back at Zora, standing in the doorframe with the brim of her hat highlighting the smile on her face.

“I caused nothing but trouble today,” I said. “Do I really deserve this?” The roof was only fixed because of Zora, that wall too. All I did was sweep the hallways.

“Well, I say if you believe you deserve the room then you do, besides you have a lot of work tomorrow! Try to get some rest, would ya?” More work, I guess that shouldn’t be too bad. I looked at Zora. Then I smiled.

“Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. These girls in my science class and english class keep harassing me in the hallways and I went into a depressive episode. My therapist said that he hasn't handled a situation like this before like wtf?? I haven't been to school for a week and my therapist is looking to giving me extra holidays so I can figure out what school to move to or if I'll have to be homeschooled. Also the doctor saw my SH scars lol and the TADC episode killed me.
Anyways thanks for reading the chapter! Leave a comment if you want (PLEASE LEAVE A COMMENT)

Chapter 6: Two Duos Make A Quartet - Chapter IV

Chapter Summary

> After their run-in with the police, our hero (and villain) find themselves in the pits of the Sweet Jazz Prison. After a week, the constant routines started to bore Eclipse. Only when Sylvie drew up a diagram of the prison was when the servant of darkness decides to approach a fellow prisoner.
> The walls were powered by a unique mechanism that absorbed the energy of epithets! Although, the two protagonists might need some assistance to escape.

Chapter Notes

> Hi guys! I have no idea why this chapter is so long so hopefully it'll feed you guys until next week LMAO.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter IV

Two Duos Make A Quartet

Eclipse POV: 6718 words (67...)

Misery strolled down the prison cafeteria.

The chef, if he was even qualified to be called one, had a grim look plastered permanently on his face. I'd hate having to thrust down dirty porridge on trays for a living too. As a servant of darkness, I am above such work…but I'm not like one of those despicable prisoners! I'm a completely innocent man! It was that Dr. Glasses kid who took my staff and unscrewed that manhole for his stupid journal. And he had the audacity to pin it on me when that police lady interrogated us!

I stared down at my plate then turned back to the cook who was glaring at every single one of the prisoners in the room. I gulped, then bit my lip. The porridge on my silver tray looked sad, just like everything else did. The grey walls and the bars of steel couldn't bring itself to smile either, so why should I? With a shaky hand, I brought the spoon up to my tongue and almost fell over when it came into contact with my mouth. One bite was too watery, the next

one was filled with lumps. The porridge itself tasted like expired sour cream and those ‘apple pies’ you’d find at the bottom of a McDonalds bag…But at least this slop was somewhat better than my mum’s cooking.

The chef cracked his head around. His neck cracked before he bolted down the hallway after a middle-aged man with a metal ladle. The poor guy was just trying to throw the food into the bin. I shivered at the bizarre sight. I mean for the past few days in this dump, I’ve seen situations weirder than whatever goes on in public restrooms. Trust me, you wouldn’t want to know. If you dared to question it, you’d be the next one stuck upside down in the bowl of the metal toilets.

I continued to eat, each bite more tolerable than the last. Either that or my brain is trying to tune out my suffering. This dump had been my home for the past week and my cellmate wasn’t any less strange. He’d mutter smartass garbage whenever the lights went out, something about a control centre I think.

Is this where renowned villains ended up? I mean, I did the wrong thing the right way! Zira shouldn’t have survived that fall but if I returned now I’d still be missing Aika’s star shard. There was no way I could go back empty-handed! My head rested against the metal tray, absorbing the sorrow from it. Maybe it’s just the prison blues getting to me. Once I get out I’ll be over it and ready to bathe this new land in darkness! With my head on the plate, I set myself up to be covered by more of that vile porridge.

I turned back to Sylvester, using his spoon to scrape his share onto my tray. Each scoop of mush ended up in my nostrils. Shaking my head, the slop splattered onto the floor and out of my hair.

“Hey, knock it off, Glasses!” I said.

“It’s your fault we’re even here, moron.” Sylvie continued, “You were the one who was messing with my research!”

“Well you’re the one who opened up the manhole!”

“I had to!”

I pushed him. He flicked my forehead. His nail left another red mark next to the collection I had on my face.

Our little quarrel was accompanied by a multitude of prisoners scattered around the cafeteria. They all seemed above their twenties, most of them looked like washups who should be admitted into retirement homes. A man with the word ‘neck’ tattooed on his chin kept glaring

at another guy who had the world's longest goatee. Then there was this buff man sitting with a tiny lady in the corner of the room.

I've been warned in passing about her, apparently she's gone mad. The strange triangles she kept scribbling in the recreational yard was proof of that. She'd carve them into the ground with her companion, discreet enough to evade the notice of the guards but obvious enough for me to catch her doing it on the occasion.

"Why are we even here! I'm fifteen! Shouldn't we have been put in some detention centre or something?" I asked. Sylvie pinched his nosebridge.

"Sweet Jazz is the city of freedom but it's also a breeding ground for crooks," Glasses said. "It's gotten to the point where juvenile detention centres have huge waiting lists and most of them just get pushed into regular prison. Rumours say that there's even a secret underground organisation of criminals which go deeper than the banzai blasters."

Sylvie tapped all the excess of his food off his tray then put down the spoon. "That's just a rumour though. I doubt it's true."

As Sylvie went on and on, I couldn't handle swallowing the porridge anymore. For one thing, it was awful. But so was constant Sylvie's nerd blabbering. It gets to a point, not everyone can handle it for long. Just to shut him up, I grabbed a handful of the sludge and smushed it against Sylvie's cheek. It made a squelching sound but anything was better than his nerve-wrecking voice.
"Hey! Knock it off, moron!" Sylvie leaned backwards, grabbing a portion from my tray and putting it down my shirt. The way the moist texture ran down my chest was grating!

"Do that again and I-"

And with that, we ended up in solitary confinement… once again. I was familiar with the off-white bricks and the afternoon sun which mocked me from the closeby window. The mattress wasn't any better than the ones in the cell but at least there was a pillow. I sighed and opened a slit in the wall. It was a little something I discovered on the second day here. Besides, there's nothing much to do while incarcerated. Sylvie was on the other side, sitting by the wall expecting my arrival.

"We need an escape plan," I said.

"Wow really? I couldn't have guessed."

“Shut up,” I replied. “You summoned that weird dust stuff back in the ruins which made those statues fall asleep, right?”

“My epithet?” Sylvie groaned, “I’d use that on the guards but the prison walls are powered by a disabling device. Those epithet absorbers were installed when Bliss Ocean started meddling with the law enforcement.”

I sighed, I would’ve suggested digging out with the spoons like they did in those prison break simulators but the guards confiscated them every time to prevent stuff like that from happening.

“If we wanted to exterminate the absorber then we’d need to break into the control tower,” Sylvie took a pen out of his rugged hair and slipped a paper between the wall. I’m not sure how the guy could fit a whole pencil case in that mop but it worked. The crumpled page showed a messy diagram of the surroundings, sketched with messy annotations and chicken-scratched lines. The drawing outlined a clear path from the cells to the tower in the centre of the building. Up the stairs, into the walls and then a diverging path to three terminals at each point of the triangular prison. Well, at least that’s what I thought it said. It was hard to tell apart the letters from Sylvie’s handwriting. I took note of the layout, something about it seemed familiar but I didn’t dwell on it.

“I have a plan but it’d be impossible to execute it with just the two of us.” Sylvie pointed at the terminals, tracing his finger around the diagram in between the brick wall.

“Every facility in this prison is powered by the main control panel. The energy walls, the doors and most importantly the epithet absorber. We’d need to turn off all of the energy distributors alongside the main source at the same time or else the automatic energy restoration system would turn the terminal back on,” said Sylvie. I hummed and slipped the paper back through the gap in the wall.

“How’d you figure that out?” Between the walls, his expression was elusive. Sylvie’s eyebrows creased through the opening.

“My scientific specialty is researching and observing the effects of epithets on a person’s psyche. I’ve seen blueprints like these before,” Sylvie replied, a touch of uncertainty caressed the back of his throat. “The plan is close to perfect, if only we had two others to accompany us…” Two other people. My thoughts flashed back to the days in the recreational courtyard. “I might have a clue on who can help us,” I said.

“You want us,” Mera paused. “To help you?” The lady crossed her arms, her cobalt hair falling against the sleeves of her uniform. “That’s ridiculous.” I stood in front of the grumpy

woman. Sylvie stood behind me with a baffled glare. The courtyard was loaded with other prisoners but their heads were too stuck in their workout sessions to acknowledge our ‘idle conversation.’

“You mean the first person who came to your mind was her!?” Sylvie whispered into my ear. His volume was soft but his tone was the opposite. The carvings on the ground were an exact replica of the diagram on that crumpled map Sylvie drew up.

“Those guys are the opposite of reliable teammates, Eclipse! They’d throw us out the window if they got the chance.” Mera fiddled at her fingers, scraping her chipped nail polish while Indus was gathering sticks at the foot of a nearby tree.

Indus and Mera were the only ones in the crowd of criminals which stood out among the rest.

“We need them,” I whispered back. Sylvie shook his head.

“You honestly thought I’d accept your request? And I thought you were smarter than this, kid.”

“I am not-” Sylvie sighed. “What’s the point?” Indus waltzed over, dropping the oak tree branch onto the grass. His tanned muscles were barely contained by the orange jumpsuit.

“Me and Lady Mera have been trying to figure out how to turn off the ‘disabler’ for the last few days,” he said. His voice carried strength, echoing throughout the recreational yard. “It has been proven difficult. The machine is stubborn! Like a barrier!” The guy yelled, flexing his muscles and breaking through the shirt of his orange uniform.

“I told you to stop doing that, Indus,”Mera said, placing her finger on Indus’ lips and scanning the area for listening ears before turning back to me.

“But he’s right,” she admitted.” Whenever we turn off the power on one side of the building, it turns back on the second we get back.”

“Pfft- of course you don’t know the technology behind the mechanism,” Sylvie retorted. “This is like basic knowledge, at least for a genius like myself!” Mera kneeled down like she was talking to a puppy.

“Quiet,” She said between clenched teeth. “We can handle escaping on our own, right Indus?”

With a shiny grin and a thumbs up, Indus affirmed Mera’s statement. She stood up with a proud face but then Indus knelt down, almost on his knees, to her level.
“Are you sure we can’t accept their help? All of our attempts to sneak out have been faulty. The guards are starting to catch on.” A contemplative look washed over Mera’s face. She took a glimpse at me and then a harsher one at Sylvie.

“Ok, we’ll give you a chance. If you mess this up however, you’re on your own, twerps.”

I peeked behind through the cell bars, signalling at Indus who was on the other side of the building. Night fell upon Sweet Jazz once again but that won't stop the will of I, Eclipse; servant of-

"Pay attention." Sylvie pulled at my ear.

"Ow, what was that for!" I said.

"You were drifting off again." Oh right. I shuffled out a slingshot from the back of my pocket. We constructed it with some string in the recreational yard and pieces from the giant stick indus broke apart with his bare hands. I took a paperclip Sylvie snuck out from the warden's desk earlier and bent it to match the keylock, twisting and turning the edges in accordance to the keyhole.

Years of procrastinating in class was finally worth it! I spent most of the school day doing anything besides work. Like making animals out of the paperclips the teachers gave out to keep all the miscellaneous sheets in one place. Those same papers ended up in the bottom of my backpack or in the sets of pants I grabbed from the washing machine in a hurry. I set my aim to the parallel jail cell, pulled the string back and propelled the makeshift key into Mera's palm.

She tinkered with the lock, opening it and dodging the flashlights alongside Indus. The rock of a man pushed the bars open, creating an opening for the both of us to slip out. This would've been much simpler if I just had my staff! The door could've been open in an instant with one energy blast but that stupid officer with a (real ass) god damn sword just had to confiscate it from me!

According to the plan we discussed in the cafeteria, this is where we split up into two groups. I grabbed Sylvie, slinging my arm around his shoulder and turning towards the left side of the building.

"Let's go, Glasses-" Sylvie pushed me off, his eyes on the other two criminals. His sight was set on Mera's smirk, her glistening eyes reflected the light of the overhead LEDs.

"Keep an eye on Indus," Sylvie said. "I'm not sure what those two are up to. If they try anything funny, that's it for our plan." Indus stood tall with hands that could crush me in the matter of seconds and those seemingly empty eyes. I could handle a guy like that, I've countered many heroes before. (Even if in most cases they've defeated me.) I can do this!

“Fine, but could I at least go up to the control centre in the middle? I’m not the one who’s power is being disabled by it.”

“Yeah, but you also don’t have your staff.”

“I can handle it. For I am Eclipse; servant of-”

“Fine, just go,” Sylvie said. “That’s an order.”

Sylvie gestured at Mera, she looked back at him with a face of disgust before falling back into her usual boredom.
“Try not to get another migraine while you’re gone,” I said.

“You **are** the migraine!”

We split ways, Indus and I went to the right side while Mera and Sylvie diverged to the left. Indus gave Mera a little wave, she reluctantly mirrored it. Sweat fell down my skin while goosebumps ran up the other way. Indus’ shadow casted over mine, almost swallowing it whole. I’m a villain, I can handle this!
“Now, it is just us, little warrior,” he said. My feet stopped in their tracks, turning around slowly to face the giant. He gave yet another shiny grin, both sets of teeth shot out at me. I swallowed my fear and brought back my usual confidence.

“Little warrior? What gave you that impression,” I asked. “My name is Eclipse; servant of darkness!”

It was quiet for a while, from down here I couldn’t tell what was going in the giant’s brain. Instead of the usual disdain, however, Indus’ face sparkled with delight. He put his hands on his cheeks.

“Servant of darkness!? What an impressive title! How...how honourable!” My ears perked up at Indus’ intrigue but I hid my brief moment of shock underneath my usual confidence.

“I know, pretty impressive am I right?”

“I am impressed! To think I am in the presence of such a significant figure! Tell me, how did you gain such status?”

“Well, I’m willing to regale you with some tales,” I said.

“I served under My Lady as a devoted follower of darkness-”

“Dr Ashling is a Lady?!” Indus yelled, “If we don’t cross paths again, little warrior, please deliver my dearest apologies to her!”

“Ah! No no no. I’m talking about someone different. You see I come from another dimension but when I came to this one my cape tore and now I can’t teleport back to the domain of darkness. I’ve been trying to get home but then all of…this happened.”

“Oh,” Indus said. “How unfortunate…tell me more!”

I told him the stories of the day I laid my eyes upon the star guardian and my mastery of void magic. He followed along, nodding to each one of my stories and engaging with questions. When I was met with an enthusiastic inquiry, genuine joy swelled on my face. He was actually listening!

Indus shared an anecdote about his own training under Lady Mera. She taught him the arts of cooking, laundry, taxes and- wait what?

“So, Lady Mera didn’t teach you cool powers or anything!?”

“Laundry and taxes are cool powers! They are the backbone of keeping order in the household and in society…I don’t fully understand the taxes part though,” Indus said.

As we continued onwards through the hallway, Indus continued his story of his childhood in the desert. Most of it seemed blurry but he did mention his old mentor and the mastery of his barrier epithet.

At the end of the empty hallway was a broken door, smashed from the previous attempts Indus and Mera made to escape. The gaping hole stuck out of the middle with metal scraps dispersed around the area. Most of the guards seemed to be patrolling the lower levels so the coast was clear for us to crawl through. Security lasers shot to the parallel wall, leaving a buzz of heat energy through the air. I knelt down, ash powdered each spot where the laser’s aim was concentrated.

“Lady Mera was able to disable those with ease the other night, yet without my barriers I believe I can’t achieve this on my own.” My shoulders relaxed. With a flip of my hair and a sparkling smirk, I lifted my leg up.

“You can count on me,” with grace and poise, I leaped over the first laser. Only to trip on air and fall straight into the detector. My nose buried itself into the floor. Why did I even try that? Indus stood there, observing like I was showing him an ancient custom.

“I understand now,” Indus said. “I shall replicate your method with gusto!” He took a step back. Indus’ bare feet scratched against the tiles before he stiffened his shoulders and fell head-first into the floor. Cracks surfaced around his limp body, breaking the fall which had the impact of an earthquake. I unstuck my face from the floor, scuttling my butt over to the limp body of Indus Tarbella.

“How…How exhilarating!”

A red tint expanded through the room, flashing harshly as the security lasers vanished. An alarm rang out throughout the whole prison. The bars which stood by the jail cells were reinforced with extra metal walls. The guards gathered in the main hall, visible through the window but then my view was obscured as the windows themselves were shut down with metal plates. The hallway rumbled. The walls inched towards each other, determined to exterminate the vermin crawling through. Wait, would I be considered the vermin in that analogy?

“We have no time, servant of darkness,” Indus yelled. He swept me off my feet and onto his chiseled back, sprinting head first for the other end of the hall. With one hand, he threw me like a professional shot put thrower then dove through the closing exit. I collapsed, catching a brief breath before looking back up at Indus.

“You saved me,” I muttered under my heavy pants. Indus’ stern face relaxed as his cheeks curved up.
“That is my duty, servant of darkness. As a bodyguard, my honour relies on protecting the ones who need assistance. Even Lady Mera needs assistance with some things. Like moving boxes.” My hand rested against my beating chest and my shoulders eased. I needed a minute, maybe two if we got lucky.

Mera and Indus seemed like complete opposites, one sweet the other bitter. But even with the constant dismissal and the cold demeanour Mera showed her bodyguard, Indus still spoke with utter respect about her.

“Why do you stick around that lady anyway?”

“It is quite apparent, servant of darkness, Lady Mera once defeated me in an honourable duel and since that day I have been devoted to training under her guidance,” Indus said. “As a bodyguard, Lady Mera is my single priority.” I looked down at my hands. The same ones which broke my own morals for the will of Lady DeVoid. The same ones which held Zira over the edge. All for an order.

“Does she ever make you do things you don’t want to do?” I hesitated. Indus, who was sharing a breather on the ground with me, rubbed his thumb along his chin.

“Why of course, even if it goes against my own morals, I just have to readjust my definition of honour,” Indus put his hand to his chest. “Why do you ask, friend?”

“Well..” I trailed off. Could I really tell a stranger about this? We haven’t even known each other for a good second but something about his manner felt…welcoming. Warmer than any adult I’ve ever met. For one thing he didn’t treat me like a delusional freak or a lousy kid who spent his life wasting his potential. He gave me a grin, a grin unaware of all my failures and mistakes. But a grin nonetheless. For once, I felt connected to someone. It was hard to put into words.

“Well, I was tasked by my lady to take someone else’s life…but in the end I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” I gritted my teeth to hide the blatant lie that came out on impulse. “It was an order, an ultimatum I think. She told me that if I came back empty-handed then I’d be stripped of my title…and well, everything I have.” I brought my knees to my beating chest. Indus sat there, he nodded along then leaned against the wall.

“How unhonourable,” Indus whispered. His eyes rested, coming back with a pensive dullness. “Though…if it was an order from your lady then it should be ok,” The cold ceiling lights shone upon Indus’ creased forehead. He paused, almost as if he didn’t believe the words which came from his mouth. “I’ve never crossed paths with your lady and I’m sure today hasn’t been the best impression of mine. But devoting your life to someone means to commit to your servitude!” Indus’ tone was slow, walking through his sentences with caution. He extended a hand, those gigantic fingers brought me back up to my feet. “That’s why you need to pick someone you can rely on. Your protection must be reciprocated by your master, I learnt that from another bodyguard and I am yet to live up to her ways.”

“We must move hastily, servant of darkness,” Indus said, looking over at the green dome of energy. “There’s not much time before the guards will catch up to us!” The epithet absorber stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by too many wires to count. Its green light reflected off of the scattered electrical equipment which connected to the device. The room carried the subtle scent of burnt circuits through the air. Indus stood by the power switch, navigating through the interface in the order he could remember from his past attempts at escaping.

“There we go, now you just need to head to the main control room,” Indus swiveled around to face me. I gave him a nod. “I believe in you, servant of darkness. Do it for me, your trusty companion!” I waved at him but then stopped halfway up the flight of stairs.

“Will we still be friends after we break out?”

Indus stopped too. “I…I don’t know, servant of darkness. But if we meet again just know that you will always have a helping hand from I, Indus Tarbella!”

Interlude I: Sylvie POV

I made it through the monotonous hallways which filled the prison walls. Whoever decorated this place clearly didn't bother, they should've at least pretended to actually care. I'm sure a potted plant or two wouldn't affect their paycheck too much.

Our temporary quartet split up into duos to cover as much footwork as we could in the limited timeframe. Eclipse was a bumbling idiot, Indus wasn't any better. So I was left with the cunning Mera by my side as we ventured through the walls. Besides, if she was left with her bodyguard then they could've messed up my plan. Mera and I navigated the corridors in silence, it was better that way. These stupid migraines were enough to deal with already.

I rotated my head to take a glance at Mera, the same unforgiving expression she had when she broke my bones at the museum remained on her face. Her arms were crossed, closing off any suggestion for friendly banter. I'd rather tolerate her condescending glare than her scratchy voice anyway.

She was the reason I went to the hospital. She was the lingering force I felt whenever I used my epithet, the one she stole from me for a short but impactful second. She was the reason I wasn't not a well renowned researcher, she just had to meddle with my academic preview! And yet, she still gave me a look of repulsion like I was the one who ruined her life!

"Don't try anything, twat," Mera cut off my prolonged stare. "I'm only letting you help because you have info on how the disabler works. If you mess this up for me, then you won't see the end of it."

"Me? Mess this up?" I snickered, "You're only here because I needed extra hands."

"Aww, you couldn't figure it out on your own?"

I winced at her tone, "Shut up! I would've done it myself but the engineer behind this device clearly didn't want that." Or at least didn't think to consider if they got into prison that they'd have to disable their own machine.

"Oh please," Mera said. "Would you drop it with the grudges or whatever. That museum heist was so last week and it's on you that you got in my way."

Just ignore her. She'll get bored of messing with you eventually. Or at least I hope she would. People like her don't have real substance in their statements. They just rattle on and nitpick until they get bored of your reactions.

We made it to the first terminal. The machine itself was a genius invention, the blueprints were perfect. If only it wasn't being used against us.

"You stand here by the distributor. When Eclipse reaches the middle, the screen will flash a choice to do a system-wide shutdown," I said. She looked bewildered at my order. Mera took a step back. Her blue heels tapped against the floor, its colour contrasting directly with her jumpsuit.

"What? You just want me to stand here?"

"Yeah, I'll go to the terminal on the furthest side," I made my way over to the door which led to the next passage. It was almost identical to the one we just came from but before I could go further in navigating the building, Mera's voice brought me to a stop in my tracks. She chuckled coldly.

"Stop acting like you're some genius. Even with a PHD or whatever, you're still just a little kid," she said. I wanted to argue. I wanted to yell at her that she was wrong. I am a genius, I worked hard to prove it. But despite Mera being completely wrong, my tongue held itself back. Maybe it was the way her smirk perked at the edge of her lips or our past experiences together. But for some reason, I couldn't land on why I stayed quiet.

"After we break out, Indus and I will never see you again. Just remember this, as long as you keep your cocky head up your ass, you'll never do anything noteworthy enough to be remembered."

The room went silent.

My head did too.

No thoughts, no words…

Maybe she was right about that.

The low volume of the room was ephemeral. Sirens wailed out throughout the building, a red light flashing against the generator and throughout the room. The doors were slammed open by a group of officers, led by the infamous Percival King.

"Damnit, it must've been Indus or that blonde twerp you set him up with! This wouldn't have happened if we did things my way," Mera said.

"Well you and your little bodyguard would've messed up the procedure if you guys were alone!"

“Well, I’m sure your flawless plan definitely was foolproof. If it was then the cops would be lounging around with a donut or something!”

“Detain them at once,” Percy pointed her finger at both Mera and I before the legion of guards charged after us. They pounced towards Mera, rubbing that patronising smirk off her face. Tackled to the ground, wrists held together. She tried to fend them off but it proved to be hopeless, all she could do in that moment was yell out to me.

“Just run! Go to the terminal, I can…handle this myself.” I nodded, sprinting down the hallway faster than I did back at the temple. Guards chased after me. Their target was set on my back. Even at the next terminal stood another dead end. But before I could accept my fate, the doors were shut by a metal plate. Leaving the guards bombarding the door from behind and their knocking fists were left unrequited.

The main control room held a similar machine, only it was much larger than the small waypoints scattered around the prison. The burnt stench was even worse here. The heat of the machine almost scorched my fingers when they came into contact. I bit my lip, shaking my hand to dispel the sensation. Once it was gone, I searched the room for the control panel. It sat against the green orb-like structure with the type of set-up you’d find in a plane cockpit.

“Hm…” I swiped through the different settings and displays, mimicking the order which Indus demonstrated earlier.

“There we go! Initiating complete shutdown!” I brought my hand up to click the button only for my action to be cut off. Slash. A sword flew across the room, barely missing my head. I froze as blonde strands of hair fell against the glowing monitor, my vision blurring as I brought it up to the doorway. A recognisable face reflected off the screen, those same eyes which penetrated through courage like daggers and a face which always stayed in its stoic form.

“Back away from the control panel, citizen.” Percy’s hand came up, facing towards her sword which was left ajar on the wall. The bricks beneath it crumbled, letting a multitude of chunks fuse together and cultivate into a miniature tower which launched the hilt into Percy’s palm. The blade was bathed in the glistening green light of the main power unit, but its sky-coloured metal still stood out from the rest of the room.

I stood my ground, confidence feigned at my face as I threw out my imaginary cape. It would’ve been totally dope if my actual one didn’t break! I brought myself back to my declaration with an empty hand in my orange uniform. “You’ve underestimated me, officer, for I am Eclipse; servant of-” the ground beneath me shot up, the parapet of the artificial

tower blasting me into the sky. My shoes scraped the floor on impact as I slid across the tiles.
.

“Can someone just let me say the line!?” Still on my feet, my eyes were directed at my staff, connected to Percy’s belt and rubbing hips against her sword sheath. The shutdown initiator was blocked off by a wall of stone towers. Each time Percy used her powers, the band on her wrist resisted the electromagnetic waves radiating from the epithet absorber.

Towers emerged from the ground. One by one with urgency. Debris fell against my shoes as I took out the slingshot from my back pocket. It was flimsy, barely holding together at this point. But I swallowed my pride. The broken pieces of the floor became the key to my slingshot, pulling each rock back and shooting them at Percy. She parried them with perfect precision with her sword. Each swing carried a unique sense of dignity.

I flinged a flurry of rocks. She cut them perfectly in half. The control room became a battlefield filled with pillars of stone. I sprinted across the room. Each step I took was followed by a new tower arising from where I made contact with the floor. Despite my many attempts to distract her with my makeshift weapon, she persisted like a silent knight. Her blade and body became one, moving in sync throughout the room like a performance. Though her clear focus on me was lost for a brief moment when she took another scan of the room.

The area had become a maze of Percy’s own towers. It would be hell to navigate the differing heights throughout the room. Her initial daze wore off with haste as she started slicing through the towers for clarity. My location, sealed by the very powers she used against me. It was perfect! With a large stone tower protecting me from her view, I aimed my slingshot at the back of her neck. Slightly lower. Maybe to the right? There’s the spot. I let out a soft chuckle beneath my breath but that action alone gave away my position. She launched herself in the air, flipping backwards and landing with her sword at my neck.

“This will end here,” Percival said. “I respect your persistence but meddling with law enforcement is something I can’t allow you to proceed with.”

“Yeah, ok, you win Ms police officer,” I admitted. “You outwitted me, the renowned servant of darkness…but also, you should keep an eye on your belt next time.” Percy perked up. Her attention came to the empty slot where my staff used to sit on her hip. I stabbed the end of my wand into the floor, the green glow flooded into the cracks in the tiles. The area around me released a purple aura as all the surroundings were propelled into the sky.

“Aha! It actually worked!” I slapped my cheeks and hurried over to the main control panel. Percival yelled for backup into her walkie-talkie. My hand stretched out to the button. Slipping my finger past the interface but with the slightest contact, the system went into an absolute shutdown.

Mera broke free from the officers, landing a harsh kick beneath their chin and pressing the button on her terminal.

Indus sent a guard flying with one punch to activate his.

And Sylvie knocked the officers with a full swing of his yoyo before slamming his hand against the last one.

The walls of the prison came down. The doors, the metal plates and even the cells deactivated with one subsequent sequence. The crowd of criminals below started an uprising against the limited guards left behind in the main room. Violent chants and an assembly of footsteps could be heard even from the highest point of the prison.

Reinforcements swarmed around the main gate which was flooded with criminals. They all crammed into the entrance, even when the police tried to apprehend them. Me, Sylvie and the duo of Indus and Mera decided to escape through the recreational yard instead. This was the place we spent the last two days planning together, after all. The reinforced energy gates were now left as regular gates Indus could easily pry open with his hands.

“I told you my genius plan would work,” Sylvie shot a teasing, smug grin at Mera. Almost like a proud cat. The lady groaned and Indus picked her up with gentle hands before placing her on his back.

“Beat it, kid. Don’t preen yourself,” Mera said. “You’re on your own from here, twat.” Indus gave me a high five, his colossal hands barely felt the impact of my hardest hit.

“This is where we depart, servant of darkness. I encourage you to keep fulfilling your honourable duties,” Indus said. “Farewell Dr Ashling and servant of darkness!”

He turned around, the sunrise hitting against his toned body. I stared off into the horizon, then at my sweaty hands. They still shook, ever so slightly but noticeable enough for it to occupy my head. I watched the one source of comfort throughout these strange couple of days run away. Where they were going, I had no clue. What they’d do next, that was also something I didn’t know.

But once they blurred out into the distance, my hands felt cold once again. It felt like home. Just another disappointment. A disappointment Lady DeVoid would never want back.

“I’m not a kid!” Sylvie yelled before breaking the window of an unoccupied police car with his yoyo. He crawled through the shards of glass into the passenger seat while I came in the normal way. (I broke the glass and entered through the back to crawl over into the front.)

“I point, you drive. I’d prefer not to risk driving with a fuzzy head,” Sylvie whispered while rubbing his forehead.

“Got it! You lead the way, Dr passenger princess!”

“Stick to Glasses,” Sylvie said. “Also when did you learn to drive?”

“I didn’t.”

Interlude II: ??? POV

When darkness bathes the world, true gems are able to sparkle. If we opened all the rocks on the planet, geodes would be able to share their kaleidoscope of worth! So if we prioritised the people who got lucky enough to be born inscribed, we’d be promoting failure. Failure which is accepted in day to day life.

The warm lamps from outside pierced my pupils when the doors were open without warning. Zora made a habit of knocking once and then entering without an answer. In my humblest opinion, that just defeats the whole purpose of knocking!

“Hey boss,” Zora said. “Just lettin’ ya know that room 406 has been occupied. Got another one who ran to the city in hopes that their ‘hidden talent’ could be recognised by the big leagues!” The Cowgirl rested on the velvet couch, her hand soiling the green cushions I just bought the other day.

“Good to know,” I muttered. With my eyes closed, I turned to Zora with a smile. The mirrors around the room caught onto her keen eye though.

“Oh come on! Don’t tell me you’re still hung up on that runt for leaving.” Zora shrugged and slapped her knee. “That guy isn’t coming back any time soon!”

My smile remained although it was more of a neutral smile rather than a happy one. A business smile, if you will. I directed myself back at the empty wall. The blank canvas reflected a bright pattern as I opened my eyes again. To others, art was just an amalgamation of colours and objects. That's why most tourists leave the art gallery for something 'cooler' like the dinosaur exhibition. But I valued the knowledge which each stroke of paint held.

"You do know how replaceable you are, Zora." My acquaintance's carefree demeanour stayed the same but it was easy to see the cracks in her mask. "It's been a while since that day in Redwood run. You were…a difficult case. But I made work of your talents. Though you know what they say; you can't teach an old dog new tricks." I tapped my finger against a blue segment of light. The projection featured a young woman, seemingly in her mid-twenties, and her well-built bodyguard. Similar descriptions to the individuals from the museum, but I digress. They managed to disable the absorber with ease. How interesting.

"I think it's time we visit an old friend, don't we?"

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's off school! Thanks to my chronic depression, I now have more time to focus on what's actually important (fanfiction.) Anyways, it's my dog's birthday today. Happy Birthday Chip!
For more updates and artworks, follow me on my socials. I go by @apple_saucee3 almost everywhere (Tiktok, Instagram and tumblr.)
Thanks for reading!

Chapter 7: Peanut Butter And Tomato Soup - Chapter V

Chapter Summary

Eclipse and Sylvie were scrambling away from the police forces ever since they had escaped from prison bars and rancid porridge, but now what? The psychologist keeps mumbling about a certain 'Molly Blyndeff' and had brought the servant of darkness to a desolate toy shop on the empty streets of Sweet Jazz.
Eclipse looked to the left, then to the right. He can't help but feel the watchful eyes stuck onto his back but Sylvie brushed it off as him being delusional as usual. Except, that all changed when the two of them were wrapped in duct tape and thrust into a pile of plushies.

Chapter Notes

Hi Hi! I (kind of) got the update on time! Woohoo! I'm still experimenting with my writing style/ voice so I'm messing with different grammar quirks and em dashes. This is my first ever fic after all.
Disclaimer: Ai was not used in any way during the writing process. Ask my friends, they've seen my horrendous first drafts.
ALSO IM SORRY FOR THE HORRENDOUS GRAMMAR MISTAKES

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter V

Peanut Butter And Tomato Soup

Interlude III: Giovanni POV

7373 words (FUCK)

Sugar, Spice and exactly one-hundred and fifty two board feet of buoyant lumber!

These are the special ingredients required to whip up the perfect bowl of tomato soup. The sugar neutralises the acids in the tomatoes, or at least that's what my mother said. I never paid attention in chemistry, or all of sophomore year. Oh and I also built a multifunctional, transforming villain-mobile to conquer the lands on foot and sea! I call it…

“The Evillest vehicle of evil deeds and evil! Made by Giovanni Vincent Murder Potage…of evil,” I declared. My super epic announcement was followed by an equally as epic guitar riff.

“Thanks, Darkstar,”

“No prob, boss.” Darkstar leaned back against the railings of the treehouse, adjusting the pegs of his guitar ever so slightly. Sheet music was scattered around the porch, some were left astray after falling down onto the grass.

“Boss, is this good?” Crusher asked. He was set up on a ladder, hammer in hand as he smashed in the lopsided nails into the wooden boards. I gave him a grin and a thumbs up,

“You’re crushing it!” Ha, get it?

The backyard door swung open, Flamethrower waltzing in with a flyer in his hand and a beaming grin on his face. If someone saw Flame’s expression on TV they’d probably think he was in a theme park commercial, either smiling or about to scream. He called out for the rest of my boyz™ from the foot of the treehouse. They were gathered with a good ol’ game of black jack (but they exchanged french fries instead of chips since that was the Giovanni way!) The makeshift abode had been acting as a temporary hideout ever since that police lady started tracking me down! I found sanctuary in the asymmetrical walls and early mornings preparing pancakes for everyone — except Beartrap, who liked waffles. Crusher and I would wake up before the morning fog lifted, with spatulas in hand and flour all over my phone screen. Following the same crumpled instructions which were often buried unevenly in a folder. But now that my name has been plastered around the city with a bounty, those peaceful Sunday mornings were bound to end the same way everything always did.

“You guys, the national cheer competition season is rollin’ up and guess who’s name’s on the top of the Sweet Jazz team!” Flamethrower scrunched the poster in his hands, shaping it into a ball and throwing it up to the others. Spike caught it with ease. Her eyes scanned from left to right along the text.

“That’s sick,” she said. Spike put her hand on her knee, tossing the paper ball around the circle. “Y’know, Darkstar and I finally caught a band! Some dudes from high school rang me up and we’re planning to go down to Bellmouth for our first concert!”

“Roadtrip buddies?” Flamethrower slapped Spike’s palm then followed with their signature handshake.

“Duh!” The two cackled and leaned against wooden walls, their laughter holding a sense of nostalgia between the high school troublemakers. A smile fell on my face but uncertainty pulled at my lips.

“Oh and don’t worry boss, even if we’re faraway the name of Giovanni’s villain group will be spread across the edge of the Earth,” Flamethrower said. He turned around and flashed a set of perfect white teeth.

“Ha! You better keep that promise then,” I replied. “Everyone in the land shall know to fear your merciless leader!” I shot them a thumbs up and a wink before making my way over to the small construction site on the other side of the backyard.

“Hey, Crusher, my man, my dude!” I leaned on the structure of the magnificent vehicle, the sanded planks left an inch of dust on my elbow. “Can I have a word with you? For villain stuff of course.” Crusher’s eyes lit up, it was pretty blatant despite half of his face being concealed by hair.

“Anything for you, boss!”

“Ok then,” I turned my head. The others were still set up on the rugged porch with chicken salt left on the edge of their fingertips. I brought my attention back to Crusher but my tone shifted into a hushed whisper, “Look, that Percival King lady has been on my back for almost two weeks now! She could find me any ol’ afternoon when I least expect it. If that ever happens, I want you to tell the cops you guys aren’t associated with me whatsoever.”

Crusher’s face scrunched, his cheeks lifted up but not in the way they would when you went over to smile. Even on our first day in the banzai blasters, my mind would go blank trying to figure out what he was thinking. Before I stood up as their gracious leader, the team looked to Crusher for orders since he stood at the end of the table like a suit of armour you’d see in the museum but without a cursed sword to throw at heroes. It wasn’t any easier nowadays to tell apart his expressions but I’d often find the ghost of a childlike smile whenever we huddled up for bedtime stories at dusk. One thing was for certain though; my request didn’t leave that sense of softness on his face.

“But we’re your minions! Our team isn’t complete without you,” he said. Crusher looked down at his shoes. “What am…what are we supposed to do without you?”

“Yeah I know, you guys are the best minions I could’ve asked for. It’s just that-...” My back slid down the wooden structure. I didn’t face Crusher and I assumed he didn’t face me either. My attention was instead fixated on the hedged fence, the same one the neighbours would throw their complaints over whenever we got too loud.
But I felt Crusher’s presence lower, placed on the ground next to me. His movements were slow, almost deliberate. I rested my cheek on my knuckle and held my arm out in the direction of the others. “Those guys have futures in front of them, they have passions, goals and a criminal background would mess that all up.” My minions cackled their heads off. Ben clenched his teeth and launched the rest of the cold chips onto Car crash’s new arm cast. Beartrap was pressed up against a tartan pillow. She was reading the first book from ‘The

Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy' series that she picked out from the library with at least three empty bottles of cold green tea by her side.

"If Beartrap got caught then she might be taken back to that deadbeat. As for me…"

"You practically have nothing to lose?"

My smile couldn't cover my wavering voice. My fingers tangled in the grass with the same pressure which I've pent up ever since that day at the Blyndeff Toy Emporium. Crusher's unkept nails rested against the chipped blades of grass which I picked out. His thumb brushed against mine but he pulled away.

"I understand, boss.."

"See! I knew you were reliable," I said. I brushed my jeans off and headed to the sliding door which led to the kitchen. I'm just glad I got that over and done with.

"I-" I paused. "I'm gonna go organise the pantry. I'm not sure how beartrap drinks so much of that green tea slop. That stuff has nothing going for it but someone has to keep up with her cravings."

Stepping through the door, I avoided looking back at any of them. My unaware minions and even my trusted friend…I knew I'd have to leave them behind eventually but I wish our time together lasted longer than it did.

Eclipse POV:

The being of destruction sat upon a throne of quartz. Strings of gloom shot out of her head, the force of bloodlust rushing through her cheeks. "Fear my presence, beast of calamity! For I, Eclipse; servant of darkness and henchman of lady Devoid shall not waver in the face of the alliance of the stars!" The rag doll kept her composure. Her posture was nothing to bat an eye towards! She planned the merciless execution of the dark forces atop her storefront pedestal and behind those soulless button eyes. "That's what I thought! Utter a single word and you'll be killed…to death!" I pointed at the doll with victory, Sylvie stood not too far away at the door of the toy store.

He knocked at the store entrance. The streets in this part of the city were crowded enough to conceal us within the horde of people but quiet enough for officers to glance over this spot on the map. The Blyndeff toy emporium was flooded with colours. Stuffed animals and other dolls— although they were less menacing— filled up the window display but the door had the word ‘closed’ written in bold, red letters. Despite that, the psychologist kept waiting for an answer from the untouched toy store.

“Is this where you got your PHD, Glasses?”

“Is this where you got your wand?” Sylvester said, “Just wait one second. I’m sure doing that won’t be too hard for the great servant of darkness. Then, once Molly answers the door and we settle down, you can figure out how to get home to your dark lady on your own.”

“It’s good to know you finally acknowledge my worth! This task shall be easy for I, Eclipse; servant of-” Sylvie started knocking more aggressively than before.

Five minutes ran by in slow motion as we waited…and waited. I kicked a rock, whistling a simple tune before fiddling with the ends of my new cape. In a rush to get out of our uniforms, Sylvie and I raided as much as we could from a backyard laundry line before we got chased off by a raspy old woman with a broom. Sylvie managed to keep his old lab coat but all of my garments were nowhere to be found! At least I had snatched this cape tainted with the contents of the galaxy. It was a splendid addition to my villain attire, even if it was just a towel.

The toy store seemed cozy and cutesy with the multi-coloured garlands and the adorable, toy models of classic, two storey homes but something about it ticked me off. Maybe it was the thousands of beady eyes stitched onto the toys or the fact it was closed in the middle of the afternoon like it had been abandoned at business’ golden hour. Or, it was the lingering feeling of eyes following us from street to street which Sylvie brushed off as me ‘just imagining things.’ It would make sense to be cautious — the cops have probably started search parties for us. But who cares about what made sense? This just felt wrong!

“Are you sure I'm just going crazy?” I asked, “What if a spy wisped me away while you weren’t looking?”

“You’ve always been crazy,” Sylvie said. He really could’ve said anything else… I grumbled and looked around for any watchful strangers on the other side of the street. The parked cars, the dark alleyways and the empty beach which peeked out from between the buildings. Every detail could be foreshadowing our sudden demise! Either that or it was all a red herring.

“If I’m right about this then you better stop with those smartass remarks, it gets to a point where- Glasses?” I looked around, back at the door, the alley, but he just…disappeared!

I called out for his name, my voice echoed through the empty streets. While biting on my nails, I accidentally choked on it and then bit my finger in a panic. My finger swelled up but I

pushed my pain aside. How did he escape so fast? Where did he even go!? What if the true Sylvie was the hallucinations I made along the way!? Maybe I have gone mad…How could my mind conjure up such an annoying delusion? I didn't even know such annoying people existed! Does that mean I'm all alone for real now!? I'm stuck here and have no way to get home but even if I tried I'd be coming back to Lady Devoid empty-handed. Zira shouldn't have survived that fall but I have no evidence that she's really dead and who knows what happened to Aika's star shard! If I don't die here then death will probably be waiting for me back home! Should I start digging myself a grave? There was a cemetery on the way here! I could trace my steps and-

In between my rapid spiralling, the world had been thrown into eternal darkness. My sight was blocked by what seemed like a cloth and my vision had disappeared as quickly as Sylvie did. But when I tried to call for help, a hand covered my mouth.

The next thing I knew, I had woken up in a pile of stuffies. The darkness remained —the duct tape strapped around my limbs prevented me from finding a light switch. I shuffled through the mountain of toys to continue my search but instead my face ended up on the brightly coloured carpet. Ouch. I looked up but then our eyes met. A being so incomprehensible, even a renowned villain such as myself couldn't conjure a description. I shall try my best so excuse me for my poor wording. The two holes on its face were like gaping voids. It was a sort of malice I hadn't seen before, even in the domain of darkness itself. True unfiltered evil. A gaze which evokes pure terror from the core of your repressed dread. Even the cruelest couldn't withstand such a force.

"Peanuts!" I jumped back from the peanut plushie, falling against the softest pillow I've ever come across. I wiggled my arm out of the duct tape and pointed my staff at it but only droplets of void magic dripped out. This thing's busted, I guess I'll have to wait for my wand to recharge. In a dusky room like this, charging my wand with dark energy should be easy enough. The peanut's smile was deceptive! Unruly even. With its lanky arms and its round spheres for hands, I could sense its horrid intentions-

"Could you get off me?" The terrifying monster which rested at my feet shifted my focus away from the familiar boy in glasses who was sat down beside me. Both of us, trapped in the duct tape. I wriggled my chin off of Sylvie's chest, leading me to fall onto my back. Wind caught up in my throat as the curse of the peanut's all seeing eye lingered at my pupils.

"Don't make a sound." Sylvie's questions were covered by the bottom of my new crocs. "If I move any closer, that horrible beast will infect me," I said in a hushed whisper. I couldn't help but glance back at the peanut plush, just in case it came any closer.

"Eclipse…it's a plushie."

"Do not underestimate it! That…thing was the one who had put this curse on me. Their peanut kind attacked me when I was still a mortal youngster. They stole my breath and

transformed my skin into an inescapable itchy hue! That being isn't just a plushie!" I backed up, squishing Sylvie further into the soft pile of toys. "It's a monster."

Sylvie looked back at the plushie, contemplating my putrid curse. "So, you're allergic to peanuts?

…

"Yeah."

Sylvie paused. He looked into my eyes, his own reflecting a familiar bewilderment which was usually followed by a condescending or snarky remark. This time, however, Sylvie took another approach; he cackled and gagged on his own laughter.

"Hey! You dare to belittle my curse!? This is a serious issue!" I kicked the other boy once more as light infiltrated the room. The saturated mess of interior design was more apparent when I could actually,well, see. In the golden light, the silhouettes of what seemed to be our captors stood in the doorway to a cheery kitchen.

Their features weren't decipherable from here, leaving only the outlines of two girls. A spiky ponytail stuck out from the side of one's head, the other was tall and lanky but puffed around the edges with her bouncy blond hair. The two girls shut the door, leaving the room dim once again. I ducked down, pulling Sylvie with me under the arrangement of stuffies and the **peanut**.
Pitter patter, pitter patter. The kidnappers pranced around the room, seemingly aimless and unaware of our presence. But then a hand extended out from the shorter one's purple hoodie and left a soft but firm grip on my shoulder. She took out a torch — the kind of flashlight you'd find tucked away in the back of the garden shed.

"State your business," she said, the cold light hitting against the rim of their darkened eyebags. Her pink hair juxtaposed the empty eyes behind her bangs. They were so roughed up, that an 'X' permanently scarred her hair somehow.

"We're not looking for trouble," Sylvie said. His voice was composed but the sweat running down his neck said otherwise. "I'm just looking for Molly Blyndeff." The two kidnappers circled around us like a pack of hyenas eyeing down their prey. The torch went out and came back in the hands of the blondie with the bells in her hair.

"You'll never get your hands on our friend," the other girl said. She seemed less like a kidnapper and more like a prissy princess in her pink poofy skirt. "In fact, I'm not sure how

you even know Molly or who sent you here, but I'll make sure you never see her again, even if it's the last thing I do!"

The blonde girl turned to her friend and mumbled something like, "am I doing the interrogation thing correctly, Trixie?" I couldn't quite hear it right but 'Trixie' nodded.

"You're doing great, Feenie."

"Why thank you," 'Feenie' said. She twirled around and spun her dress before standing firmly once again.

"Now spit it out! Who sent you here," she continued.

"I told you someone was watching us-"

"Be quiet," Sylvie said. "We just need to speak with Molly. Eclipse and I can't exactly go home so we were looking for a place to lay low."

"I don't believe you," She said. "No one ever will!" Feenie gargled a scream and hissed at us.

"Wait." The pink haired kidnapper looked at Sylvie. They flicked on the light switch then basically rammed their face into Dr. Glasses. The interrogation took a long pause. She played at the tip of Sylvie's hair, then at the stained labcoat. She muttered every few moments, making sure their conclusion was absolutely certain.

"You're the guy Molly calls on the phone," she said. "That 'Sylvie' guy who was at the museum." Feenie froze.

"Yes, that's accurate," Sylvie replied. Then Feenie gasped. She stood there, stunned in her own skin. What started as a minor chuckle exploded into excited giggling as she held up a fancy binder. The words 'Marriage Plans For The Future; By Phoenica Fleecity' were stuck to the golden plated cover with sparkly, pink, glitter glue.

"I can't believe I'm meeting you in person, Mr sheep boy!"

"Dr Sheep boy," Sylvie said. Phoenica's soul practically left her body. She fell into her friend's arms and squealed like an opera singer.

"Don't mind her," Trixie said. "Why'd you come here anyways?"

I cleared my throat, eyeing the both of them before twitching my other arm out of the duct tape and placing my hand on my chest. "We're currently on the run and Dr Glasses over here said this would act as a decent hiding spot!"

"Ah, the law," Trixie gave me a thumbs up. "The law sucks."

“The law rocks!” Feenie said.

“The law…socks,” Trixie said.

Phoenica made a beaming recovery and kneeled down next to me, “And you’re sheep boy’s friend, I assume?”

“Why yes,” I started, shuffling forwards with as much charm as a hostage wrapped in duct tape could have. “I am an ambassador from another dimension and a henchman to the forces of evil. My name is Eclipse; servant of-”

“He’s not important,” Sylvie covered my mouth but then immediately retracted it when he felt my tongue run against the surface of his palm. He shot me a glare through the frames of his ugly glasses. Why did he pick like the worst shade of yellow?? Feenie looked me up and down, from my gorgeous face to the stylish crocs on my feet.

“You’re a beautiful magic man from another world!?” She shoved the binder into Trixie’s face with an elongated gasp that turned into a croak. “Trixie, get my light yellow marker,” Phoenica said. “I have a new chapter for my marriage folder!”

Sylvie pressed his lips and rolled his eyes, “we don’t have time for idly standing around! I need to speak to Molly.”

Feenie drooped and stuck out her bottom lip. Trixie however put her hands in her pocket and said,

“I think we can help you out.”

We stood outside the Blyndeff toy emporium and watched the cars pass by. Feenie still had her head in the binder, scribbling away with a giant bag of high quality markers.
“Cousin Giovanni told us to make sure no one tries to bring Molly home,” Trixie said to Sylvie. “She’s been staying at his minion’s house for the past week but I’m not sure Lori or her dad noticed yet…or if they will at all.”

“Yeah, sorry for wrapping you guys in duct tape,” Phoenica said with her head against the papers. “Holding hostages for the first time was so fun!”

“It’s fine,” Sylvie said. “But why are we outside? Are we waiting for an uber or something?”
Trixie gave Feenie a little nudge, not too harsh but just enough to pull her out of the clouds.
“Oh right,” Feenie dug into her pocket and pulled out a small bell. She placed the small item into my hands and I scratched my nail against the precious metal.

“I offer this to you as a courting gift, ambassador of evil! This bell shall ring in the direction of any key or keyhole if you offer it fine metal,” Feenie said. “If you ever feel lost, you can always request for Bell boy to guide you to the key of my heart!” Smooth, I thought. My hand reached out to Phoenica’s, slipping it under her soft palm and resting a kiss on her hand. The girl’s heart practically burst out of her chest before she fell into Trixie’s arms.

“Thank you, lady Phoenica!”

“How princely!” Trixie cleared her throat and gestured over to Sylvie who gained a sour expression from watching the scene. He looked at Phoenica’s hand, then mine, then brought his attention back to the roads. Feenie perked out of her lovestruck daze with an, “Oh right!”

She clicked her fingers and a fancy limo pulled up. The engines were silent, even while powering such a large car. A dark hue tinted at the car windows as they lowered. Phoenica’s bells jingled cheerfully before she hopped into the summoned car in the passenger seat next to the black-tied chauffeur.

“Was that your epithet?” I asked.

“Nah, he’s just paid to answer all my commands,” Feenie said. The insides of the car met up to the expectations of the exterior. Velvet carpets lined the massive car with leather seats on both edges. The backseat smelt of burnt cigarettes and red wine but the passenger seat had the scent of sticky cotton candy, almost too sweet. Empty tubes of glitter glue and craft supplies were shoved into the cupholder in the front of the limousine.
“This thing is sick.” I sat down on the seats and plopped my feet up on the other side. “We even got extra leg room-” I yelped when the nerd boy slapped my legs down from the chair.

“Mind your manners.”

“Jeez…I’m sorry,” I mumbled. With Feenie in the passenger seat and Trixie near the front of the car, we sped off to where Sylvie’s friend was residing.

The sunset shimmered across the highways and streets of the city. The town square had an open park filled with planted walnut trees and a botanical garden packed with dozens of hydrangeas. While zooming past the downtown area, I caught sight of more clothing stores than I’ve ever seen in my life! The windows of the car even had automatic openers! Up and down, up and down.

“Greetings, Sweet Jazz!” My voice echoed out the window in the crowds of traffic. The driver in the beaten up ute next to us gave me a weird stare but I gifted her with a charming villain wink. When the green traffic light came back, Sylvie couldn’t help but grumble.

“You’re so embarrassing…”

The outskirts of the city was lined with lush bushes and complex roadways. We diverged from the highway and exited out on a higher route. I stuck my head out the window and caught a glimpse of a familiar head of blonde hair and the equally as familiar red and blue sirens.

“Uhhh, Sylvie,” I said. Sylvester didn’t even look at me. He was too busy fiddling with his seat belt and whistling away from me to notice. I called for him again, then a third time. He tapped his fingers, checked his wrist for a watch which wasn’t there and eventually he gave into my constant blabbering.

“What do you want?”

“It’s the cops!”

Only then did the boy in glasses perk up. He sat his knees on the car seat and took a glance at the huge line of traffic. It stretched out across the path forward to a trio of police cars, standing ahead of us on the side of the road. Most of the cars were being held up due to Percy and her crew of officers stopping each one to question them in detail with that same disciplined stature I remember well from our encounter in prison. She pulled out a pile of crumpled wanted posters, featuring our prison quartet and a man with pink hair. Sylvie panicked, scrambling around the limo to spot any sort of exit. The road was elevated, surrounded by nothing but trees. In his eyes, there was no escape. Each exit was actually an illusion of light, shining down upon the various roadways below us. Just a one way road to jail cells and eating rancid ‘porridge’ again. But I had another idea.

“We’re gonna have to jump out the window,” I said. Sylvie’s eyes flickered with shock behind his glasses, looking rather flabbergasted.

“What!? Onto the road??” Sylvie pointed out at the long drop beneath, “Have you gone crazy?” In his eyes, jumping off a highly raised road would be a reckless and idiotic move, which it was. But Sylvie forgot one crucial fact.

“I’ve always been crazy.” Tightening my grasp on the sleeve of Sylvester’s white lab coat, I stood on the ledge of the open car window.

Feenie was frozen in the passenger seat, tears pricked her left eye as the sunset hit against my back.

“Eclipse,” Phoenica said, holding out her hand towards my starry towel-cape.

“Sorry, lady Phoenica. This is where our fate splits apart.” Sylvie’s incessant protesting faded to the background. “But remember this, our hearts are just a ring away and will be tethered until the end of time!” Feenie sniffled, wiping a tear from her sky blue eyes and clutching the end of her petticoat.

“Will I ever see you again, my one and only ambassador of evil?”

“Uhh, I don’t know!” I said, “Goodbyeeee!”

And with that —and a thumbs up from Trixie— I thrusted the both of us out the window. For a split second, we were suspended in the air like a couple of looney tunes characters before we plummeted into the forest below. He held onto me, I held onto him.

“I didn’t agree to this!” Sylvie yelled, his voice dissipated into our fleeting fall as we rapidly approached our end. Trixie leaned their head over the window. She patted Feenie’s shoulder then moved her hand to the girl’s head.

“My prince,” Phoenica sniffled. “My heart yearns for thou until the end of time! Shalt you cross paths with I once more, the tugging of heartstrings and loneliness will cease to prosper.” Trixie leaned against the back of the passenger seat, holding a box of overflowing tissues.
“I’m guessing you’ll be like this for the next week?”

“I mean probably,” Feenie said.

A smirk shimmered at my lips. I raised my staff to the air, cultivating the power of darkness into its bulb. I cut through the air with a potent evil energy to summon a magical platform which would carefully plop us onto the ground like dolls in a little girl’s dollhouse…but that’s not what happened. Was it? The energy charged up but all which came from my staff was a *poof* and the energy floated away*!* Damn it, I forgot my darkness metre was at 2%...

“Was **that** your plan!?” Sylvie asked.

“Uh yeah.”

“Ugh!” He clenched his fists, almost bursting the blood vessels in his hand while doing so. “I can’t believe you’re the last person I ever see,” Sylvie flicked my forehead.

“Don’t pretend like you’re any harder to hate, Glasses.”

“At least I didn’t throw us out of a moving car! What happened to thinking ahead?!”

“Well, I hate you,” I pushed Sylvie’s face out of the way.

“I hate you-” Sylvie pushed back, smushing my cheek away with his pale palms, “-more!”

As we descended to our doom, Sylvie held his breath and threw out his yoyo from the back pocket of his lab coat. It almost fell from his hands as he juggled the damn toy in the air. An orange glow covered the unusual weapon, Sylvie's eyes scanned for the best place to land before he launched the yoyo towards the ground,

“Counting sheep!” At the peak of the yoyo’s speed, a herd of orange and yellow sheep were summoned onto the ground where Sylvie had his aim set. The elasticity of the yoyo shot back, through the air and into his palms. As we approached the landing pillow of farm critters, I pulled Sylvie into my arms and he held back tightly.

The impact of our fall turned into less than a soft squish against the ground (literally.) I rested my back against the woolish animals. Disgruntled pants escaped sporadically as I looked over at Sylvie and his tangled mop of hair.

The psychologist rested his arms on the sheep, staring into space before looking back at me. “So you survived,” he said. A slight disappointment hid behind his tone like an elephant hiding behind a pole. I groaned and threw out a sarcastic,

“You ok?” Sylvie rubbed his eyes, clenched a smile and looked hopped off the counting sheep.

“Just peachy,” he said. I smiled and patted the small animal before it disintegrated back into the orange epithet dust it was created with. I gave him a content smile and strolled over to the house which sat at the outskirts of the taiga forest behind us.

The brick house was covered with vines — I couldn’t tell if they were real vines or the ones you’d find on amazon during the pandemic — and a row of newly planted hedges. They hadn’t grown to the state where they merged together but as reluctant partners they were trying their best. The house owners were pretty lucky bagging this old wonder. It had that certain suburban charm but kept the ordained windows from times when aesthetic was prioritised over functionality (like how things should’ve stayed.) One of those windows at the back of the house was left ajar. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if we hid out here for a while, just a night or two would work. I looked back at Sylvie who was still where the sheep once stood.

“You coming?” I asked

“I might,” murmured Sylvie. “I just need a minute-” Sylvie cut himself off, mouthing the rest under his breath and crossing his arms. I stared at him, he kept looking at me but pulling his gaze back when he stared back for too long. The boy cleared his throat, “I said: I’m sure insolent morons just **love** risking the lives of people who are actually important…”

“It’s fine, Glasses. We made it out alive,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. Sylvie wasn’t having it though.

“What if your plan didn’t work? What if I wasn’t there to save your sorry ass?”

“But those things didn’t happen,” I replied.

“Just throwing out possibilities. Every great researcher is always considering alternate outcomes.” Sylvie shrugged his shoulders, mirroring the same gesture I just did.

“Ok then, come on!” I extended my hand. Sylvie ambled over with shaky fingertips. What once was a gritted smile turned into a crinkled nose and a scowl on his face. For a moment, Sylvie held his hand out, seemingly ready to grasp my mine. “I’m sure you would’ve survived to write your little thesis anyway and tomorrow we’ll hit the road and find your friend on foot! You’ll live, ” I said.

That’s when Sylvie’s patience snapped, or at least that’s what it looked like. He pointed his nose out and scrunched a hand in his hair. “What is wrong with you!?” He started. “You just go on and on with playing the villain and you never think about the consequences! Those actions of yours build your image! And if you keep meandering around like this then you’ll ruin mine!” Sylvie’s breath became heavy then slowed down as he left a frustrated glare on me. I pursed my lips.

“At least I’m not wasting my life away researching! You think spending every waking second calling yourself a genius will make you special? Well it won’t!” I pressed my finger against Sylvie’s chest, “I bet after this you’ll go back to living a dull, mundane life and then you’ll realise you’re not all that and you’re just some weirdo who can’t deal with having to accept it!”

“Tell that to yourself,” Sylvie argued.

“At least I don’t rely on a degree to make me useful!”

“If you were of any use then your ‘dark lady’ would’ve come running to bring you back home!

I’m sure she’s doing fine without you.”

My accusing finger fell limp against Sylvie’s statement. I furrowed my eyebrows, staring at the other boy with widened eyes. Disbelief caught in my windpipe, keeping my breath in chokehold before I turned back to the window.
“What?” Sylvie asked. “I’m not breaking into a house with you, moron.”

“Suit yourself,” I muttered. “Go find your friend. I’ll figure things out on my own.” Sylvie shifted. Or at least I thought he did. His footsteps grew quiet against the freshly cut grass. I stepped through the window, taking my shoes off and holding them above the carpet. I’ve been here for a week, almost a week and a half at this point. And I still have yet to set foot in the domain of darkness once again.

The room was devoid of furniture. Boxes were scattered around the corners of the space, stacked on top of each other lazily. The walls were pure white, the ceiling was too. The only personality which the room held was a mattress which sat next to a metal bedframe. Stickers were scratched against the old headboard — the ones you'd get in the groceries if you spent over $20 on a good day— and the afternoon sunlight bathed the whole room except for one spot. The walk-in closet stood where the light didn't touch and from it a looming shadow stuck out.

It creeped around from the end of the closet. Sharp edges emerged from the creature's scalp. Its lanky body leaned over, spikes protruded out from what seemed to be a fluffed-up collar. Before I could bolt out of there, Sylvie closed the window from the other side. He sneered at me through the glass pane like a cat while I banged my fist against the window.

"Glasses, you jerk!" I yelled.

The beast sat up.

Its skinny fingers, almost too skinny, left what seemed to be a…jar of peanut butter?

When it turned its head towards the light, the figure transformed into a rugged man with pink hair. We shared a glance for a moment before he pointed a peanut butter-covered finger at me.

"Aaaaaaah! It's the cops," he said.

"Aaaaaaah! It's the- wait what?" I took a glance out the window but then my mouth was invaded by a fiery ball of red liquid. My tongue screamed too, its nerves burnt and numbed in the speed of light. I flailed around, trying to get the taste off my scarred tongue, only to realise…that tasted pretty good. It was somewhat like the tomato based soup I whipped up whenever my younger sister was sick. Or the broth I'd usually order when I went out to the hotpot spot at the edge of town. Lady DeVoid never liked that place…

"Behold! The true, unyielding power of my Epithet! Percival King, you shall face the wrath of I; Giovanni Potage!"

"That's really nice actually," I said, licking my fingers.

"Why thank you- hey! My epithet is anything but nice! It's evil which is probably the opposite of nice I think!"

"The seasoning is marvellous! The aftertaste has this sort of nutty flavour which really elevates the...wait a minute," I looked down at my throat. The red hives started infecting my arms once again. I screamed, falling onto the floor while choking on my own spit. Oh my DeVoid!

“I didn’t know my soup did that,” Giovanni said. He stood there while I floundered helplessly on the floor.

“Call an ambulance!” I said between coughs. “But not for me…” I landed a flurry of fierce kicks at Giovanni. He stood completely still in the face of my merciless assault and after about seventeen punts to shins, the man had depleted exactly one hit point.

“Aha! Yes!” I threw my arms into the air but then immediately started coughing again and gagging on air.

“You…You can stop now,” Giovanni said.

A knock pattered on the door, opening to a small girl. From my blurry eyes, I could slightly make out the features of her space-brownie hair. A pleated skirt emerged from the bottom of her bear hoodie and next to her was the jerk who closed the window on me! Giovanni turned to them. Then to me.

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” the pink haired man said.

“You dolt!” Sylvie ran over to me and knelt down to my level, “he’s allergic to peanuts!”

“Jesus Christ,” with one swift movement, Giovanni evaporated the soupy substance from my digestive system. My breath came back to me once more. The little lady used as much of her strength to help me sit up.

“Sorry, kid,” Giovanni said, standing on the side of the room with a sheepish smile on his face. My head was still trying to find its way back to normal after my allergic reaction but now I can process what the others were saying. “I thought you were someone else.”

“Do you know this guy?” The girl looked over to Sylvie who had pinched the bridge of his nose.

“He’s my…companion,” He replied. “Don’t think much about him, Molly, he was scrambling around in a dumpster one day and just stuck to me ever since.”

“I didn’t know you were friends with homeless people too,” Molly smiled.

“Hey! How dare you underestimate me! Do you know who I am!? My name is Eclipse; servant of-” My sudden yelp made the small girl jump and start apologising like a rapper with a million lines. She hopped from ‘sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you!’ to ‘I’m sorry about my boss! I’m sure he didn’t mean to almost kill you.’ Sylvie patted her shoulder and with a couple of breathing exercises, she calmed down. Giovanni stretched his arms and placed a hand on his chest, similarly my usual gesture. Droplets of soup seeped from his hand, barely staining the burgundy colour of Giovanni’s coat.

“I’m just glad the cops didn’t actually find us! Then, my epithet wouldn’t have been the only criminal getting cooked!”

“Uh boss,” Molly mumbled.

“Why yes, Bear trap! As your merciless villain leader it is my duty to answer any question and fulfil any request my minions ask upon me-”

“Boss!” ‘Bear trap’ screamed louder, “the cops are outside the house!” Giovanni’s rambunctious speech came to a halt as a huge swarm of police cars were standing outside the suburban property. Each car was lined up diagonally in front of the house. Officers flooded the main door, distracted by someone else but I doubt they’d be interviewing them for long.

“How’d they find us!?” Giovanni said.

“It doesn’t matter, let’s just go,” Sylvie grabbed my wrist and speed-walked down the hallway. The nerd’s eyes moved from his grasp on my arm to my pursed lips. His fingers loosened, brushing the instinctive action off of his lab coat. Sylvie muddled between a ‘sorry’ and a ‘whatever’ so he ended up muttering a mesh of the two.

“Boss, don’t you think we should alert the others first?” Molly gripped onto Giovanni’s sleeve, digging her hand into the fabric. “Wouldn’t it be worrying if we just left without a word?” The tall man’s face softened, his eyebrows raised and his lips parted.

“It’ll be ok, Beartrap. Crusher will handle it from here.”

“But…” Molly stuttered.

“Don’t fret, dear minion! Just focus your little bear hood on keeping yourself safe.” A subtle smile tugged at Molly’s lips as her boss stood up to face me and Sylvie. “Move along, losers! From now on, you follow my command!”

“I actually have a pretty sweet hiding spot for occasions like these.”

Crusher stood in the doorframe, clutching the wooden doorknob as Percy eyed him up and down with a notepad in hand. She ran her fingers through her hair. Crusher’s sweat fell behind his. Giovanni said to state no association between them. To the police, they weren’t friends whatsoever. They weren’t even acquaintances! If Giovanni pushed a fine distance between himself and Crusher when moments were tough, how could they ever be anything outside their friendly relationship?

“So, sir, we saw a couple of fugitives climb in through your window. Have you been harmed or robbed in any way shape or form?”

Crusher looked around, thought back to Giovanni’s request, then brought his attention back onto the officer.

“No, ma’am. We’re fine. My friends are still pretty distressed after those criminals broke in without warning,” Crusher said. He was never the best at keeping a good front, even when most of the time it seemed like he had no emotions at all, but Percy clicked her pen and nodded without a question.

“Well, if you and your companions are distressed at the moment, we’ll make sure to come back for a casual meeting once you’ve all calmed down,” Percival said. She turned around, heading back to her car and clutching the handle. “I have some criminals to catch.”

The group of police cars drove off and Crusher let out a sigh. He couldn’t tell if it was out of relief or something else. The man sat down on the line between the unknown of the outside world and the comfort of his house. The cozy lamp light would always accompany him but a fire which would keep Crusher’s heart ablaze had always been just out of reach. Giovanni’s probably gone by now. Without a word, either. His heart told him to listen to the one he loved, besides Giovanni has always been there to bring light when he needed it. But, something about him just running away before he could have a moment to say goodbye, it left a faint sting at the bottom of Crusher’s heart.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I deadass had to finish the art-work for this during my dad's lecture since I had a busy schedule and my dad's crashed into mine. (University?? Is that a Sylvester Ashling reference.) Anyways I actually started reading books! I cracked open a new novella and the way they portray the main character's internal monologue and dialogue's contrast is super interesting.

Chapter 8: The Distilled Grotto ~ Chapter VI

Chapter Summary

Tapped away from the bustling night life of sweet jazz, Giovanni led the way to a desolate beach at the edge of the city. Eclipse, who's mind had been hung up from his and Sylvie's argument, is reluctant to settle in with the museum trio's dynamic. From beneath the waves, a gate of silver bricks opens the way to a grotto tucked underground. With a crystal oar in hand and inside the decks of a glass canoe, our heroes ventured through the canal made of distilled water.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I apologise DEARLY for the lack of updates. I knowww its been a while, like two weeks, but I'm back! My plan for future updating schedules will be down below. I've gotten horrendous writers block and I've been trying to root out the problem of the chapter for like almost a month! Jeez.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter VI

The Distilled Grotto

Eclipse POV: 5157 words

After the whole breaking and entering fiasco— and the companionship of Sylvie's friends— I sprinted through the ruckus of night-market chaos in the heart of Sweet Jazz.

Parades of artisan's stalls sold various trinkets and valuables to the ambassadors of art visiting the city. Jumping through antique oil paintings of tropical island shores, I avoided the aroma of spices which destroyed my sense of smell with one whiff. They were all just simple products next to the precious jewellery, sculptures and really anything you could find. I had to stop myself from admiring the diverse works for sale; Sylvie was already ticked off by his lack of artistic analysis skills. Ticked off enough to spout bullshit assumptions of me. Well, it didn't matter. Keep his words behind you. Keep Sylvie behind you. *Keep everyone who doubted behind.*

We stopped in front of the open sea; white sands between my toes. Midnight washed over the city. Restless cars, open streetlights, they were all visible from the seashore. I tossed my shoes to the wayside and took a dip at the blackened sea. As the tides drew in, the rocks between the sand stabbed into the heels of my feet. The freezing waters brought a sense of *something*, perhaps warmth? Ironic, really. Looking out at the limitless expanse ahead of me, the ocean abyss reminded me a little of home.

Home.

A couple of locations perked up behind that word. But suitably, the domain of darkness was the first. The endless stretch of nothing but sea —reflecting the black sky— brought me back to simple times. After my contract with Lady DeVoid and my ascension to glory, I spent most days sleeping against the vacant void. I'd huddle up to my sleeping bag, gazing at stars which stretched beyond my reach until the the sound of flickering campsite lanterns lulled me to sleep. Even the servant of darkness needed a night light. It alerted me when the sun came over the horizon in my old world. The fire cracking fading into nothingness was the only indicator of time in a domain where light never touches.

Sylvie caught up— Molly's hand in his while he panted from our desperate evasion. He took a couple glances back; from the distant police cars to the equally as distant shores, dormant on the other side of the ocean.

"I think," Molly huffed, knocking her fist against her chest and standing up straight. "I think we lost them."

"Good riddance," Giovanni said. He followed the duo, kicking a can with the words; *Sleepyside Beans - fully organic*, etched on the metal surface off his foot. Then, he stuffed it into his pink hair, just in case. "Those guys don't know when to quit! Seriously, do they have anything else to do? I'm sure they've forgotten a donut somewhere up their measly asses."

"Language." Sylvie followed, placing his woolish slippers into the pockets of his lab coat. "We don't have time for whining and hollering. If the police don't catch us then another group of captors will."

Sylvie shot a glance at me, disdain reflecting off his eyes and bouncing onto the glistening sea. Was that the right word? *Disdain?* I couldn't tell, really. His face scrunched into his usual scowl but grimace tugged at his lips a little too much and his eyebrows scrunched a little too deep. All which was clear was that his face said one thing;

I'm sure Lady DeVoid's doing fine without you.

I bit my lip, standing off to the side as the trio exchanged banter and inside jokes without context. Something about a museum, I think. The sand between my toes picked at my feet; their contact was piercing like miniscule pairs of teeth, gnawing at the top layer of skin. I slipped back into my shoes as Molly knelt down, picking at and collecting the miscellaneous pieces of trash that the shore washed up— throwing clumps of sealife into the tides when she found them. Giovanni nudged Sylvie's elbow and threw out a backhanded compliment about his posture — or well, as discreet as an elephant could be in the cosmos. The exhausted researcher simply sighed.

Across the expanse of sandy beach planted an array of palm trees. They swayed in the midnight breeze; a coconut or two dropped from their branches alongside its brothers and sisters on the floor. It was a strange contrast; the tropical greenery climbed up one ledge and then took a harsh turn back to the dense pines. Off the side of the shore were lonely rockpools, descending into a colony of beach caves between the salted rock formations; deep into the walls of the cliffside. It was practically a private beach. You'd think that a busy capital city would have a handful of night dippers or they'd make space for another tourist spot by the waters. Instead, there was no one. No one at all. Just us, standing on the shores, accompanying the sporadic cricket choirs.

Molly trudged over to Giovanni in her yellow gum boots. The wistful, beachy air wafted through the shoreline, despite the night (and really, the whole day) freezing off her fingers.

"Boss," she asked, tugging at Giovanni's burgundy sleeve. "I thought you said you knew a good hiding spot…"

Giovanni put his grievances aside, kicking his boot through the sanded floors and picking at the holes in the sand. He shuffled through his backpocket and pulled out a key. Rust barely scratched on its surface and the jumble of souvenir keychains jingled when they fell into Molly's palms.

"You'll be in charge of key duty! Besides, you guys will *love* the roughhouse complex," Giovanni said. "Every criminal has a dark side—with even darker secrets—but every chum and scoundrel down here has an underside, then an underside under that! Pretty dope, am I right?"

"Sounds convoluted," Sylvie added.

"*Sounds convoluted,"* Giovanni slapped his knee and almost choked on his spit. "You practically reek of newbie."

He swirled around, spinning to the rhythm of the high tide waves and stood in direct alignment to the harsh, shimmering moonlight. His face was bathed in the shadows yet softened bounce lights outlined the sharp features of his face.

“BearTrap! Hand over the dunce cap!”

Giovanni’s voice carried his signature bravado, vibrating the waves themselves; as any good villain should. That was rule twenty-seven of the hundred-steps-to-villainy guidebook that I memorised like the back of my hand. My favourite rule was of course the fifty-third;

When risk creeps over your villainous shoulder, grasp your adrenaline and become the beholder. (Basically, take risks, think later.)

Molly clenched her hands, a smile of recognition beaming on her face. When she uncovered the treasures in her sandy palms, it revealed a collection of knick-knacks and sea junk. Well, that’s what I thought at first. Between the chipped bottle of beer and the assortment of jewellery was a sluggish creature — white and blue like the colour of sea foam. Giovanni pocketed a sapphire necklace which hung off the tip of its tail, as well as some shiny rocks, and threw the rest of the junk into a closeby bin near the shore. He nipped on the dunce cap’s tail and held it out towards the ocean like a blowhorn.

The mollusc shrieked and bellowed into the night, the unbearing scream echoing to the waters and directing the lonesome sea. The sea parted, droplets of saltwater flew out, creating ripples and folds in the empty oceans. Climbing from the shallowest tide to about twenty metres out; revealing a tunnel hidden under the waves.

The archway was made of shimmering silver bricks, grains of sand dusted the line of cement between each one. From above, the gate looked like a lump of seabed. Strands of seaweed and formations of rocks — alongside a pinkish seastar—concealed the top of its inclined roof; shadowing it from passing sailors if they were to detour from the docks.

“Astounding!” Sylvie, with bare feet, approached the gateway between the splitted waters. He patted the flat pockets of his off-white lab coat. Must’ve been empty. “A real model of the seventeenth century Fleecity angel! How phenomenal! For once you actually outdone yourself, Giovanni. Of course, that isn’t too high of a bar to achieve but —oh, oh! I need a pen. I need a pen!” The angelic statues, adorned with precious gemstones recessed into its base, on either side of the arching doors, sat atop two pristine pillars which anchored them to the sand. Molly shuffled through her backpack, practically drowning in comparison to its size. She took out a yellow notepad, a little something similar to the one I plummeted into the drain about a week ago. Sylvie squealed, rocking on the balls of his feet to his toes. Although, when he noticed my watchful gaze on him, Sylvie adjusted back into his pin straight posture and jotted down notes with thoughtful precision.

“Don’t get all scholar-y, ya dork.” Giovanni ambled over, pulling at Sylvie’s ear. “We’re headed off to the Darkside of Sweet Jazz!” Giovanni snatched a handheld lantern rod from the untouched silver walls, tapping Molly’s shoulders and knighting her with the presence of the fire’s cold-coloured light.

“Vicious BearTraps first!” Molly curtsied with a smile and waltzed down a few steps before her boss pushed Sylvie along with her, “and dorky kids second.”

“Hey! I’m not a kid! I’m fifteen.”

“Fifteen, five, same thing!” Sylvie rolled his eyes, patting Molly’s back and continuing forward. As the other two led the way down the dim passageway, Giovanni looked back and gestured with a beckoning hand.

“You coming, servant of darkness?” I perked up, fixing a piece of hair I didn’t realise was falling against my face weirdly, then brought my attention back to the lanky man. He stood there, his black boots not moving an inch even as the pent up ocean started to grow tired of our meandering. It was strange having a group of friends acknowledge me; I mean, I wasn’t really a part of their trio anyway. I dragged myself through the coarse sand, making my way to Giovanni’s crooked grin.

“There we go! Your next order on the list (from your new and dashingly evil boss) is to *walk*!”

“Well, should practically be a *walk in the park* for a refined henchman of evil such as— ah! Hey! I’ll have you know, as Eclipse; servant of darkness, I am devoted to the cause of DeVoid and no other associates of malice!”

Giovanni snickered, itching the back of his tooth and whispering: “well, you’re venturing through the criminal streets of Sweet jazz and under. That means you’re in my domain! The Giovanni Vincent Murder Potage domain! So, you’re a part of *my* team now!”

“You don’t have a choice in that matter. ”

The cave was made of winding staircases and silver lanterns which barely helped with the lighting situation. Under the seafloor, ran tunnels upon tunnels and cerulean creaks. Even with the countless amount of paths to choose from, it only took Giovanni one peek at the

fashionings in the wall before taking a sharp turn. At the end of our short but dizzy journey, the cramped hallways opened into a small grotto.

*Drip…drip.*Water from multiple leaks in the ceiling drizzled down into the ethereal spring; stretching out into a seamless canal. A group of glass canoes were anchored up to the wall with chains of the same material. A stone archway, similar to the one at the entrance, bridged this chamber to the last. Giovanni picked up a stranded crystal oar hung up by the stone footpath and tossed it over to me, barely missing the bridge of my nose but leaving a visible dent in my forehead. Looked like our journey on foot ended here.

“You’re in the front, servant of darkness! That’s an orderrr!” Giovanni sang. He leaped into the boat, rocking the chained watercraft. Once it floated still on the river, he guided Molly inside with a gentle hand. Sylvie, not as gentle. I nodded my head, spinning the oar and catching it with graceful ease. (Ignore how the dent in my skin was getting deeper. I said, ignore it!)

“You can count on me,” I announced, dancing about until I felt my feet relax from the impact of being hit by the oar *twice*. I flicked my hair, plopped myself into the front of the boat and flashing a sparkling smirk at Sylvie— who was sat the furthest away from me at the foot of the canoe.

The stream ahead was crystal clear, pristine. The blue light reflected from the water, bouncing off the stalactites and the abundant display of tranquil crystals scattered around the walls of the cave; even in the water. I sliced through the river, pushing the canoe forwards with each uniform movement. The caves themselves were murky. As we passed through waterway to waterway, the path ahead remained dim. Yet, we continued ahead.

A little darkness couldn’t hurt, right?

Sylvie’s fingers dipped overboard into the canal, passing through the dawdling waters. His reflection stared back at him, almost wistful. Molly’s cold lantern—with ocean blue flames rested upon kindlings of silver— guided the way through the dark caves; hanging from the front deck of the canoe. Molly leaned over the boat, dipping her fingers in with Sylvie and tasting the remnants on her fingertip.

“It’s freshwater,” she said.

“That shouldn’t be right.” Sylvie retrieved his hand from the canal, tasting a drop which ran down his finger. His face creased with befuddlement. That’s freshwater, alright.

“I mean, it’s possible the water isn’t directly sourced from the ocean,” I continued, my grip on the oar steady. “Maybe the water’s from the cliffslide at the edge of the beach.” Sylvie, however, wasn’t having it. He leaned back into the translucent boat; sulking and crossing his arms.

“Don’t preen yourself over some educated guess.”

Molly—who had taken another taste of the mellow stream— added another point from her testing, “not only that. The water’s completely distilled.”

“Eh!? How'd you figure that out?” Giovanni cupped his hands and scooped a portion out the river. He grimaced, squinting his eyes and sticking out his tongue like he’d eaten too much prickly pineapple. “So plain…”

“Well,” Molly started. “When you grow up eating nothing but sour strips and gummy bears, it’s easy to taste the tasteless. It’s pretty nice, actually.”

“Is that the appeal behind that green tea stuff?”

“Well…I guess so?”

The younger girl scraped the bottom of her backpack, taking out an equally empty plastic bottle —the sort you’d buy at a convenience store— and drawing out a good portion of water from the river. Just in case. Silence stretched out through the ride. Splashes of water joined the ensemble of stillness as Molly dunked her bottle in and out of the river. With the same rhythm, I glanced back and forth from Sylvie. He was still groaning with his grouchy arms crossed against his chest; even his ‘mature cologne’ —which smelt like a nauseous car ride— was less gloomy. Was he staring at me? Or worse. Did he think *I* was staring at him?

“So…” we dragged out in unison.

We looked at each other.

Then, away from each other.

“Your shoes are untied,” Sylvie said.

“I’m not wearing laces.” I looked down at my crocs as if by the power of suggestion, they had transformed into leather school shoes with all of the laces pulled out. Sylvie sputtered, adjusting his glasses and sitting up straight.

“Nevermind— forget I said anything.”

“Another amateur mistake from one who defies my title.” I said, “only comes to show that people who doubt the will of darkness are nothing but fools! I’m sure you two would be willing to listen to my dangerous adventures of darkness.” Molly and Giovanni looked upon my shining glory. But it seemed they were focused on the tension in the air instead.

“Dont start,” Sylvie interrupted. “No one wants to hear your daring tales of evil or about your adversity against the Star Guardians—”

“Guardians of the stars,” I added.

“Whatever,” he said. “Some of us have more important things to think about. So would you give us a moment of silence for once?”

I shifted in place, the stagnant boulders did too as I paddled down the stream. Something other than disbelief clogged my windpipe. This time it was nervousness, anticipation? It was hard to tell. Up ahead was the sound of rushing water, though it was difficult to make out from the ambience of cave walls. My heart raced, it was like the slim grotto was panting too. Making out Sylvie's expressions was challenging like everything else was, they always were. But between blurred moments —the way he clenched my wrist, pulled me close when in danger but withdrew the second we caught our breath— his unwavering apathy left me with no clues whatsoever! I could barely hear myself think. Everything else was quiet. But Sylvie's grumbling was loud. Booming. Deafening. And it only grew louder when our cheeks were smushed together.

"I have no idea what's going on with you two but you need to get it over and done with, right here." Giovanni sandwiched the both of us between his hands, pushing that nerd closer. Sylvie tried prying the taller man's grip away but to no avail.

"But we—"

"Ah ah ah! No buts! You guys are my goons now! And when you're in Giovanni's evil villain organisation (of evil,) we share our problems with each other by *communicating*!" Giovanni emphasised his point by waving an invisible rainbow through the air with his wiggling fingertips. "Besides, it's a good way to pass the time."

"Please, if I had to list every reason I despise this moron, the boat trip would go on forever."

"Hmph, well that's because you fail to see your own shortcomings," I said.

"My shortcomings? The only one failing in anything is you. But you're too busy squawking around with your villainous persona to notice, aren't you?"

I brought my hand to my huffed chest with a gasp. "I'm the servant of darkness! I don't make mistakes—"

Ahem.

Molly cleared her throat, her button eyes heavy with discomfort. The girl's voice was trapped underneath her tongue but she managed to sliver out something;

"Giovanni's right." Her legs were crossed, the same way everyone was taught to sit on the floor in kindergarten. "We…We should focus on moving forward. If we let our differences keep clashing then we'll lose sight of our goal. If you guys don't want to, then you don't have to confront each other right now….But what we need to do is get to the end of the tunnel and we'll figure things out from there. We're a team…at least, for now."

Silence.

Again.

Giovanni spoke up, “you guys can quarrel and banter all you want at the roughhouse complex. Besides, they have a pool table down the road from where we’ll be stayin’! Pretty dope, right? You two can duel it out.”

“I have bets on Sylvie,” Molly said. Despite their best efforts, the air remained dense. Well, nothing too dense a warm stew couldn’t fix. Giovanni scraped the edge of his scalp for a thermos, trapped beneath his locks. A surge of fiery energy manifested in his palms, filling the container top to bottom with a steaming hot soup. He passed the thermos over to Molly and swiped the oar from my worn out palms.

“I’ll take it from here, moon man.” Giovanni stood where the railings met at a point and started rowing. Settled into the glass seat on the edge of the canoe, I couldn’t help but let exasperation take over.

“Moon man!? —” Man. I was so ready to push him into that river. But before I could act on any reckless thoughts, the thermos came into my line of sight, snatching my attention. Sylvie held it out, scooching away from the back of the boat and closer to me. When the sour flavours greeted my tongue, each trouble floated away, one by one.

The boat ride was quiet, but this time it wasn’t in an awkward or tense way. The three of us passed the soup in a circle, taking a sip from the thermos like a game of hot potato.

“This is delicious!” When the soup came back to me, I could’ve drank the whole thing if it wasn’t for Sylvie.

“Save some for us, you fatso!” Sylvie said, prying the thermos away from me and passing it to Molly. Giovanni chuckled at our simple but cozy exchange.

“Y’know, that pork sinigang recipe took me almost twenty years to master,” Giovanni whistled.

“I thought you were nineteen,” Sylvie added.

“Hey! Let me finish my riveting tale! Anyways, so I travelled to almost every island on the Islander’s archipelago, going to each restaurant and ordering the same thing,” he said. I leaned back and eyeballed the ingredients in the broth. “For one thing, half my loot got stolen. *But* I did come home with the sickest recipe and a thicker recipe book.”

I took another sip, a sensible one this time. “I mean, it was worth it. The sourness is perfect! What did you put in it? Lime?”

“Watermelon, surprisingly,” Giovanni replied. “A little bit of eggplant here and there, plus a squeeze of tamarind. My ma always cooked the watered down version of it when I was a pocket-sized force of evil. It’s bland, but a classic.” Giovanni turned back to us with a rugged

grin; his hands still clenched onto the translucent oar. “If you want, maybe I’ll show you the recipe once we get there.

Before I knew it, a warm —almost stupid— grin stretched across my face. Both sets of teeth poked out, (the way you’d get yelled at for showing *too* much teeth when your mother told you to ‘smile with your teeth!’)

The cramped grotto expanded into an endless cavern.

Still.

The water was still.

Almost too still.

Giovanni scuffled through his backpocket, taking out one of the shiny rocks from the dunce cap. With a well-aimed throw, the dim orchid pebble bounced off the surface of the water; landing twice then drowning on the third. Sylvie sighed, relaxing his shoulders and turning back to Giovanni.

“So, what happens after?”

“After what?” Giovanni kept looking forward, scanning the multitude of paths which splayed out across the cave.

“After we get to the roughhouse complex. I presume you kept a tight grasp on the amulet. It wouldn’t be too much of an ask if a researcher (such as myself) could sample it for tests. Besides, I’m sure your minions don’t have a use for it to be in their grimy fingers.”

“Hey!” Giovanni shrieked, “don’t insult my boyz!™”

“The amulet?” I asked. Sylvie’s ears twitched, his eyebrows perking up as he turned to me and my question.

“The Arsane amulet,” Sylvie started. “It's a relic we ‘stole’ from the museum. Remember Indus and Mera?” I nodded. “Well, Mera almost killed me to get her hands on it. I mean, if you read about how it was used throughout history, anyone would do the same.” Sylvie turned to Giovanni and Molly. “The power stored within the necklace destroyed civilisations in the past. Whether it was from the energy itself or the human nature which it distorted is debatable. But one thing’s for sure, the extent of its force is beyond me. It would take all the researchers in the world to decipher the arsane amulet…but even then, that might not be enough.”

Molly adjusted the collar of her bear hoodie, tugging at the fluffed trim. As she revealed the back of her neck, I saw her sweat-drenched skin from underneath. Giovanni switched between the two—Molly and Sylvie.

“Well…”Giovanni trailed off, stiffening his lips into a stretched out, anxious expression at Molly. “Well…”

“I kinda lost it.”

…

“You…you what?” Sylvie asked behind clenched teeth. However, it seemed more like he was asking himself if he was dreaming rather than asking Giovanni. Behind those widened eyes, almost a million thoughts ran through Sylvie’s head. *‘My name’s Sylvie and I’m a dumb nerd. I can’t believe anyone could be this stupid!’* is probably a good estimate of what he was thinking. “I think I heard incorrectly. Could you repeat that?”

“Well, for one thing I didn’t *lose* it. I just lost it,”Giovanni murmured. Molly sat to the side, chipping at her nails, while her boss gave Sylvie a bent smile; a crooked fang poked out from his upper lip. “Ok ok, maybe I did lose it— but it wasn’t my fault! The damn thing got stolen from me. A couple banzai vice principals snatched the thing off my hands and then some country bumpkin swooped from the trees of Redwood run like *kablow!*...or was it *kabloom*?”

Sylvie clasped his hands together, taking a deep breath. In then out, in then out. “So…you’re telling me you had the amulet. Right there. In your hands… and you let some rando take it when you had everything lined up perfectly?”

“Hey! They were mean to me!”

“I don’t care!”

The boat shuddered, the water underneath the glass started to pick up gradual speed as Giovanni went down a narrow path. Sylvie snatched the ends of the man’s jacket, seething with kept temper and knocking the oar into the river. “You lost *the Arsane amulet!* The artefact of legend! Don’t you know how many records and studies I searched through to grasp my hands on that chain!? Don’t you know what you’ve done!?” Sylvie’s pupils shrunk. His grip grew tighter. His unkept nails dug into his palms from the other side of the fabric. “If that relic falls into the wrong hands…*his* hands…I don’t know if…Augh!”

With an exasperated stomp, the weight of the crystallised watercraft transferred to the front of the boat; tipping it over and throwing Giovanni overboard.

“Boss!” Molly called out, peering from the edge. He scuttled through the racing waters, trying to push against the downwards current but to no avail. Sylvie froze up, stiffened in his own skin. His hands shook, his face darkened. All as he watched the consequences of his actions *literally* flow downstream.

I looked at him.

Sylvie couldn't bring himself to look back.

Take risks, think later.

Without a second thought, I dove into the thrashing current. Molly grasped for the end of my cape, interrupting my smooth diving technique and leading me to fall head straight for a belly flop. The landing was rocky. My eyes blurred, pebbles and residue from the still waters ran down the river and into a bridging fork in the road. An iron filtration gate which prevented rowers from crossing into the left path stuck to the parallel sides of the wall; acting as an anchor point to hold both me and Giovanni afloat against the current. Thousands of fleeting troubles boarded onto my train of thoughts. The exquisite craftsmanship of the drain blockage, Molly's distant screaming, Sylvie's—well — *everything*, and the beads of sweat which flew forwards into the tunnel.

"Let go, kid," Giovanni panted. "I can figure my way out of here on my own. I'm familiar with these waterways, you gotta escape while you can!"

"I'm not leaving you behind. We're—" I grunted, the piercing segments of rocks and crystal picked at my grip; one by one. "You're a part of my team now, Vincent Potage! And you don't have a choice in the matter!"

Tap

With one more flying rock, my grasp against the gates was stripped from me by the force of the rushing current. Giovanni fished up my hand, clutching me tight into his chest as the stream grew in vigour. The boat stopped at the gate, unable to venture forwards, and Molly's desperate screaming faded out through the sound of rushing water.

Scraping through tunnel from tunnel; from stream to stream, the narrow winding waterways opened back up into an open cavern.

Instead of stalactites, a city constructed completely of limestone and fashionings of erosion hung from the cave's ceiling. Beneath was a glowing city, protected by no walls. The streets were filled with anonymous heads, even more than the city on the surface. But one thing was clear. This was it. The city of freedom.

A place completely devoid of law enforcement. A place where villains and criminal scum roamed free. Even my feet felt elated, as if off they were wisted off the ground and suspended in the air. But wait. They were. *They were!?* My decrepit purple crocs floated above the sea-

green ocean; tipped from the edge of a hurtling waterfall. My suffocating breath caught up as the both of us screamed all the way down.

As we made one crash landing for the ocean, I braced myself for impact. Shimmering specks of water sprang out alongside a song of rested ripples. I could see…everything. From the grains of sand; rested at the bottom of the seabed, to the abundant assortment of sparkling sealife. From angelfish with opalescent scales to glittering jellyfish lingering through the water. Pastel hues of purple and blue slept among the coral on the seafloor, with rich silver seaweed alongside it. The whole thing felt otherworldly— I mean, it was. But even through squinted eyes, the vivid sea below appeared to me in vibrant colours. It was like a restful sleep…forever.
“E….se”

“Ec…pse”

A hand clenched the back of my shirt. With a single pull; I was thrown overboard from my peaceful stillness with the world below. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I breathed clean air through my nose. Air!

“Eclipse!” Giovanni stood on his toes. One wrong move and he could tumble into the marine abyss like I did. He settled me down on the shallow bay as I coughed up some water, rocks and a mackerel or two. Jeez. The distilled sea emanated a strange, turquoise glow upon the dark cave surroundings. I sat up, digging my hands into the sand and fastened my connection to the ground. The white grains of sand were so soft they fell through my fingers, unlike the rough sands of the surface. Giovanni stood by the tides, my voice barely croaking out a;

“You…you ok?” Giovanni extended a hand, helping me up. It took me a while to stiffen my wobbly legs; my hands fell to my knees for support but eventually got over the baby steps.
“I’m fine. BearTrap and that nerd should be fine too if they ended up on one of the boat ports,” Giovanni said. He held his hand to the army of intricate buildings and scrummy alleyways, splaying out in more directions than I could count. Unknown towers and structures loomed over our stray split-up.

“Welcome, Eclipse…

“To the Darkside of Sweet Jazz.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes yes! Hi hi!
Anyways I've been planning to do some switch-ups around here. Since I'm easing myself back into updating again, I might do bi-weekly updates for the next few chapters and I'll see what I can do from there. I just got back from the Philippines and because I was out and about for the whole two weeks I haven't had much time to work on anything.
I did however get into reading more published books! My favourite so far is:
A Tale Of Plagues And Perfumes; By Jake Halpern and Peter Kujawinski. I totally recommend for everyone who enjoys my work to read it as well. I did some character designs of them and OML I LOVE YOU LIME.
Anyways make sure to check out my socials and happy reading everyone! BYE!

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